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## Political action: its nature and advantages

In the years since her death in 1975, Hannah Arendt's large body of work has been ever more widely discussed. So far we can say that her readers have occupied themselves mainly with two contributions that Arendt made to political theory and the study of politics. One is her analysis of the political evil of the twentieth century, especially totalitarianism in its Stalinist and Nazi forms. The other is her analysis of the excellence of politics: its greatness and the place of individual excellence in it (*HC*, p. 49).

Totalitarianism pressed on her with such force that she had to respond and try to be theoretically adequate to those great horrors. But she began her life as a writer with a dissertation on the concept of love in St. Augustine. One imagines that uninterrupted by political evil, she could have gone on to write philosophically about the many faces that human experience and the human condition present to the determined philosophical observer. She perhaps would have turned her attention to politics eventually, as one more type of human experience, one more way in which human beings enter into relations or confront and deal with one another. I would say, therefore, that her analysis of political excellence grows without artificiality from her original interests. If anything, the horror of totalitarianism may have intensified her quest to find a reason to affirm existence, and to find it, curiously enough, in politics. Yet, whatever the impact of totalitarianism on the growth of her mind, the fact remains that for students of political theory, Arendt's effort to explore the nature of political excellence is the indispensable core of her work. In that effort she shows originality, a high creativity, together with the other virtues found in her work on totalitarianism and on such broad matters as modern culture. In this chapter, I wish to consider the reasons that Arendt gives for championing the excellence of politics. Her teaching is intricate, and one cannot always be sure that one has grasped her points properly. The abundance of differing interpretations of her analysis testifies to her richness but also to her difficulty.

In *The Human Condition*, her most powerful and extended treatment of the excellence of political action, Arendt says of Machiavelli that he was “the only post-classical political theorist” who made the “extraordinary effort to restore its old dignity to politics” (*HC*, p. 35). Arendt’s project is to take up Machiavelli’s burden again. What is the nature of politics? and What are its advantages that make it worthy of restored prestige? are her questions.

One way into these questions is to notice that Arendt is intent on determining the essence of what she often calls (especially in *On Revolution*) the authentically political. Her premise is that if the authentically political can be conceptualized properly, it will present itself as something so attractive, as well as so advantageous, that in the minds of her readers, and of others by a radiating influence, the dignity of politics will be on the way to being restored. The irony is that for Arendt the dignity of politics has nothing to do with using government as a weapon or instrument of social reform or even adaptation to social change.

Arendt’s project of conceptualizing the authentically political bears a superficial resemblance to the comparable efforts of two somewhat earlier German writers, Max Weber and Carl Schmitt. All three are devoted to the dignity of politics; to restore it, in Arendt’s case, after the experience of world war and totalitarian horrors; and to maintain it in a time of despondency, after German defeat and humiliation in the First World War, with the other two. In the project of ascertaining the authentically political, two contrasts can be posited. The first contrast is between the authentically political and what appears to be authentically political, but actually is not. The second is between the authentically political and other kinds or realms of human experience. We connect the two contrasts by saying that the authentically political is only a part of a much larger field of what is conventionally called politics, and further that the authentically political is superior to many, perhaps most, non-political activities.

As it turns out, the authentically political (or the truly or specifically political) means several things. In order to differentiate it from what is not authentically political, we must be able to say what properly inheres in or is properly present in the political realm. Hence we must theoretically exclude a good deal of what actually exists in it and what most other people – actors, theorists, and observers – mistakenly believe belongs to it. And in order to differentiate the authentically political from other modes of human experience, we must determine what advantages emerge only (or uniquely) in the political realm or are made possible only by it; or are achieved in a better manifestation than they are in other realms. Naturally, the properly political as well as the uniquely political and the politically

enhanced must all be valuable, if the dignity of politics is to be restored and upheld.

Arendt's theory of the excellence of politics is a compound of elements. Some of them depend on her understanding of the politics of the ancient world and more recent history: she borrows ideas, or reworks them through interpretation or expansion, or imputes them as necessary to some larger sense. And she introduces new elements, some of which are suggested or intimated by such philosophers as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, and some of which bear her own mark as an original political theorist. The compound in itself is a creative and distinctive achievement.

Let us turn first to Arendt's view of the nature of politics that is properly practiced, of authentic politics as distinct from the many inauthentic kinds. Arendt's understanding of authentic politics is dependent both on her interpretation of the political life of the ancient Greek cities, especially Athens, and on the sense she makes of events nearer to us in time and culture. These latter events include the American and French revolutions, and the episodes of particularly working-class rebellion that erupted in European affairs from 1848 up to the middle of the twentieth century. In her later political writings, Arendt added American civil disobedience in the 1960s to her list of authentic political occurrences. In turning these exemplary occasions into a theory of political action, Arendt recurrently provides a brief definition of the activity of authentic politics, and proceeds to fill out the definition by elaborating authentic politics – as distinct from the inauthentic kinds – in such dimensions as modes of action; personal motives, sentiments, and interests; personal passions and personal principles or commitments; collaborative purposes; and a moral code of action. In each dimension, Arendt tries to isolate the authentic. (Later, I will take up the advantages of authentic politics.)

What, then, is Arendt's definition of politics? Scattered throughout her work is the idea that politics is action and that action is speech in public about public affairs. For Max Weber (in "Politics as a Vocation"<sup>1</sup>) the authentically political activity is deciding for others, commanding them, wielding power over them, and affecting the course of events. Indeed, Weber's conceptualization is offered in the context of his theory of leadership. Politics is essentially what some do to others, rather than – as with Arendt – what all do together. She even holds that ruling is antithetical to authentic politics. In the case of Carl Schmitt (in *The Concept of the Political*)<sup>2</sup> the authentically or specifically political activity is a struggle against the enemy. The struggle is not between persons but between armed sovereign societies. The basic political relation, he says, is the dualism of friends and enemies; but there is

next to nothing about a society's friends, and much about the inevitability – beyond that, the desirability – of having enemies. But for Arendt, violence is not political at all; much less is it the means that defines politics, as with Weber; and, equally important, she says, in one formulation, that great effects of political action come about “where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is in sheer human togetherness” (HC, p. 180).

As Arendt's analysis of political action proceeds, its distance from more standard accounts grows. Authentic politics is political action. Although Arendt makes some effort in *The Human Condition* to distinguish action from speech because they are two separate faculties (HC, p. 25) it turns out that in the original Greek understanding “most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words” (HC, p. 26). I take Arendt to be saying that individual feats of strength in war, in the manner of Homer's heroes, became secondary. The *polis* regularized political action, and that had to mean that political life was conducted in the medium of speech. But speech *is* action; it is more truly action than physical acts were or can ever be. The heart of Arendt's account of action in her writings is that authentic political action is speech – not necessarily formal speeches, but talk, exchanges of views – in the manner of persuasion and dissuasion. Political speech is deliberation or discussion as part of the process of deciding some issue pertaining to the public good.

When political action defined as public speech about public affairs takes place, what is its content? What did citizens of the *polis* and participants in revolutionary councils consider and discuss with one another? Arendt's suggestion is that the content of properly political action is politics itself. The deliberation and decisions have to do with the safety of the preconditions of deliberation and discussion, whether the project is to create a new form of government, or to maintain an existing form, that operates by speech.

Put simply, Arendt thinks that political action has to be something memorable. It exists to be memorable, to become the stuff of stories immediately after it is done, and the stuff of history in later generations. What is memorable, what transforms political action into memorable deeds cannot be, Arendt thinks, politics driven by concerns that are better handled by procedures that are administrative and hierarchical. That means that the content of political speech cannot be social or economic policies. For authentic politics to be possible, ordinary people must be able to make sense of their situation and give their sensible opinions. Extensive or technical knowledge cannot be directly relevant. What is more, there must be diversity of opinion if politics is to go on. Socioeconomic matters seem to be amenable to conclusively right answers; or, contrastingly, to the mere expression of

preponderant will. Neither feature is authentically political. And when Arendt praises the insurgent working classes of Europe for their contribution to the annals of authentic politics through the spontaneous creation of revolutionary councils, she makes it clear that what she has in mind is not the contribution of such councils to the betterment of economic conditions, necessary as that was, but the ability of working men and women to think of something other than their interest. They discovered for themselves both the nature of directly democratic political participation and its advantages in experience rather than in economic gains (*HC*, pp. 215–216; also *OR*, pp. 258–266).

The content of authentic politics is therefore deliberation and dispute about what policies are needed to preserve and keep in good repair a political body, a form of government that has been designed to carry on its business by free deliberation, discussion, and dispute; or in an insurgent situation, about the creation of a government that institutionalizes the spontaneous deliberation and discussion that are now trying to bring it into being (*HC*, p. 8; “What is Freedom?”, p. 153<sup>3</sup>). Constitutional questions, questions concerning the spirit of the laws or the interpretation of the laws or (especially in modern times) changes in the political ground rules – all these are the stuff of authentic politics.

To speak of the content of politics as politics, to speak of politics as speech concerned with the creation or perpetuation of the preconditions of such speech, is really to claim that the purpose of politics is politics, that politics (when authentic) exists for its own sake. That means in part that authentic politics cannot be contaminated by the necessary or the useful, but rather has an affinity to all beautiful things, to the realm of the aesthetic. Arendt characteristically accords as much dignity to great art as to authentic politics. Granted, the deeds of politics are not objective as works of art (including literary ones) are. Political speech can be worthy of memorialization, but as spoken it lives in the moment of its performance. At the same time, engaging in authentic politics is not like playing a game. Politics is deeply serious; it can be mortally serious, depending as it does on the actor’s willingness to risk his life.

It is well at this point to notice that although Arendt is perhaps known best for her espousal of the politics of the *polis*, the impression which one could gain from her writings is that modern insurgent politics is a more faithful embodiment of her theory than the *polis* is. To be sure, her greatest philosophical achievement is *The Human Condition*, a book that places the *polis* at the center of its theory of political action. Yet even in that book, and later in *On Revolution*, a theme emerges; politics is all the more authentic when it is eruptive rather than when it is a regular and already institutionalized

practice, no matter how much initiative such a practice accommodates. The reason is that eruptive politics is more clearly a politics of beginning and hence a manifestation of the peculiar human capacity to be free or spontaneous, to start something new and unexpected, to break with seemingly automatic or fated processes or continuities; in a word, to be creative. It is a burst of unfrightened, superabundant energy.

Arendt's talents are best engaged by what is extraordinary, not by the normal. She writes with the fullest power about imperialism, revolution, civil disobedience, and totalitarianism, while less urgent or dramatic phenomena mostly fail to set her mind in motion. The praise of authentic politics as, above all, making something new happen or starting a new political relationship or, most grandly, founding a new commonwealth and, with it, a new form of government dominates her political theory. Arendt defines natality as that element of the human condition that is of special relevance to politics: she holds that politics is most itself, most authentic, when political actors, liberating themselves from oppressive rule, suddenly find themselves immersed in a new kind of politics, the politics of deliberation and discussion, of persuasion and dispute. Going from no politics to authentic politics without transition is more splendid than going from one day to the next in a society that has grown used to authentic politics. Revolutionary councils turn out to be the supreme episodes of authentic politics. The newness of every human being shows itself in a political relationship that is itself not only new but also proceeds by a continuous and improvisatory creativity. She says that "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new, that is, of acting" (*HC*, p. 8). She adds that initiative is inherent in all human activities, not only in authentic political action. But the fact of natality is made most vivid and revelatory in politics.

Authentic politics can exist only if numbers of people are brought up to want to take part in political life and do so in "the right spirit," or finding themselves in a fluid situation because of insurgency discover for themselves the right spirit in which to take part. The phrase is mine, not Arendt's, and I use it to refer to various attitudes and virtues or traits of character that alone make authentic politics possible. Arendt is relentlessly devoted to disclosing what human qualities have been salient when the politics of preserving the political framework of the *polis* (on the one hand) and sustaining the insurgent form of council politics and trying to prolong it in more settled times (on the other hand) have existed. What must people be like if they are to participate with a whole heart in the deliberations and give and take on these issues, which for Arendt are the politically significant public ones?

Arendt gives a succinct answer to this question toward the end of *On Revolution*. She says that the requisite passions (by which she also means the virtues, in this context) are “courage, the pursuit of public happiness, the taste of public freedom, and ambition that strives for excellence regardless not only of social status and administrative office but even of achievement and congratulation” (OR, pp. 275–276). Missing from this list is the will to power, “the passion to rule or govern” which Arendt, contra Nietzsche and Weber, believes has played no role in authentic politics. Arendt goes on to say that though such qualities as courage and emulation are not rare, “they are certainly out of the ordinary under all circumstances” (OR, p. 276). The implication is that even in the *polis*, which was a whole way of life aimed at instilling and cultivating the requisite virtues of political life and then giving these virtues a serious and magnificent field for their display, not all citizens could be counted on. The crucial virtue is courage; among the Greeks, courage was “the political virtue par excellence” (HC, p. 36); and Arendt returns to it in a number of texts.

The essence of courage is the readiness of the political actor “to risk his life.” In fact, “too great a love for life obstructed freedom” and “was a sure sign of slavishness” (HC, p. 36). When confronted with actual slavery, the slavish nature accepts it instead of resisting unto death or committing suicide. But in general Arendt does not demand heroism of the political actor. She says, “Courage is a big word, and I do not mean the daring of adventure which gladly risks life for the sake of being as thoroughly and intensely alive as one can be only in the face of danger and death.” Rather, what is above all required, especially when violence is understood as not political at all, is a simpler courage. She says that “It requires courage even to leave the protective security of our four walls and enter the public realm, not because of particular dangers which may lie in wait for us, but because we have arrived in a realm where the concern for life has lost its validity” (“What is Freedom?”, p. 156; also HC, p. 186).

In addition to courage, Arendt refers to such qualities as seeking one’s happiness in the public realm, rather than in private; having a taste for public freedom, rather than defining freedom as the condition one is in when politics leaves us alone; and of a certain kind of ambition – the kind that strives for excellence, rather than the kind that tries to reach its goals by any means at all, no matter how base. These qualities are summed up in the word *virtù*, which Arendt takes, of course, from Machiavelli, and which she defines as “the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of *fortuna*” (“What is Freedom?”, p. 153). *Virtù* is like (but naturally not the same thing as) the virtuosity that skilled practitioners of the performing arts display. But the analogy is

but “a feeble echo”; *virtù* in political action is incomparably greater (*HC*, p. 207).

It is noteworthy that Arendt follows Aristotle in holding that the virtues requisite for authentic politics are not mere tools or means. These virtues are immeasurably valuable in themselves, just as the authentic politics in which they are displayed is similarly valuable in itself. Neither is ranked higher than the other. There is a relation of mutual dependence: neither could exist without the other. Action elicits the virtues, but without the virtues action would not be authentic. Mutually dependent, they not only make each other possible, they exist for each other. She says that “This specifically human achievement lies altogether out of the category of means and ends. . . In other words, the means to achieve the end would already be the end; and this ‘end,’ conversely, cannot be considered a means in some other respect, because there is nothing higher to attain than this actuality itself” (*HC*, p. 207). Arendt’s implication is that authentic politics results when actors, if only imperfectly, apprehend that their political virtues and their political actions are valuable in themselves, priceless and irreplaceable.

Arendt also speaks about the discipline that the political actor, possessed of the requisite virtues and attitudes, must impose on himself. In her discussion of what she calls “principles” and of the Roman idea of the mask, she undertakes to provide a sense of the commitment that an actor makes when his action is authentically political. The discipline is an attempted consistency in the positions he adopts on those occasions when the creation or maintenance of the form of government that gives or would give him his opportunity is at issue, or even at stake. (Not all authentic politics is emergency politics, even though it is all extraordinary.) At times Arendt suggests that such consistency will flow from the character of the political actor, from his particular identity, or even from his class position; but at other times, Arendt emphasizes its assumed or chosen quality. In all cases, a person’s inward forces must be “transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance” (*HC*, p. 50).

Arendt says that action insofar as it is free – that is, insofar as it is action – “is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will . . . but springs from something altogether different which (following Montesquieu’s famous analysis of forms of government) I shall call a principle” (“What is Freedom?”, p. 152). The notion of principle, as Arendt uses it, is not altogether clear. The reference to Montesquieu’s concept of principle is only moderately helpful: unlike hers, his concept points to pervasive and culturally induced attitudes rather than to individually appropriate or adopted roles.

I think that a principle, in Arendt's theory, is best understood as a commitment, whether chosen or assigned, that has a kind of logic to which one submits, but the submission feels like an expansion, not a constriction. In filling one's role, one fills out oneself, and, at the same time, partly shapes the role. There is nothing mechanical in the process. One does not rehearse one's lines; one's speech is creative, though certainly disciplined. One tries to make sure that everything one says is, however, in character. One does not play oneself; rather one enacts one's commitment and thereby shows who one is. One's own voice sounds through the mask, and only through it (*OR*, p. 106). Nevertheless, a living person's identity is "intangible," and registers only incompletely on one's fellow participants. Indeed, it can be conveyed more fully only through an "imitation" of oneself and one's political action in a theatrical drama where on the stage someone else plays oneself playing one's role. Correspondingly, the best language to describe authentic politics is theatrical; "the theater is the political art par excellence" (*HC*, pp. 187–188; also *OR*, pp. 106–107). All these considerations apply to a principle or to a mask that one as it were wears. Notice that the dictates of the role provide more than a mere motive: that last word is too narrow, too close-minded for Arendt's purposes. Nor is a role a matter of sheer will: that would be too willful. Nor is it a matter of intellect – that is, of cognition: an actor must be politically intelligent, but not a calculating machine. All categories but that of principle are more at home in the field of individual psychology than in the mentality of worldly political actors. The actor must "transcend" his individual psychology ("What is Freedom?", p. 151). In that transcendence lies a loss of empirical self that is freedom itself. Oddly or not, the empirical self is not the locus of one's identity, in Arendt's account.

Arendt offers an assortment of principles. All of them manifest political freedom, though not all contribute to creating or preserving it. She mentions "honor or glory, love of equality, which Montesquieu called virtue, or distinction or excellence . . . but also fear or distrust or hatred" ("What is Freedom?", p. 152). I interpret Arendt to be saying that though acting from the principle of fear or distrust or hatred manifests freedom, in the sense that one may speak creatively on public matters when submissive to any of these principles, one nevertheless contradicts oneself in acting from them. One helps to destroy the very relationships or procedures that provide the frame or setting for one's future speech, for the continuation of authentic politics, the politics of freedom. I suppose that is what she means when she says that the "opposite" of freedom appears in the world when (some) principles are manifested. But I cannot be sure that I have her meaning.

Additionally, we can say that even such dismaying principles as fear or distrust or hatred are needed to enrich and complete the drama of politics. They

contribute to the failure of authentic politics; but the story of such failure is tremendously absorbing. Arendt writes with at least an equal power about failure – the specific failure of revolutions to remain faithful to their free, insurgent beginnings – as about the episodes of success. What can be more compelling than tragedy: failure and loss after great promise and eminence? For those who have had experience of the freedom of authentic politics, the political and the dramatic (or aesthetic) tend to merge, as much in failure as success, as much at the behest of freedom-destroying principles as at the behest of freedom-preserving or freedom-creating principles. At least that is the way it looks to the later theoretical observer.

Arendt's concept of acting from a principle gathers richness as her range of implication is detected. An important point that we should remember, however, is that she does not use the word to mean *moral* principle. That leads to the question as to the place of morality in Arendt's theory of authentic politics.

Arendt's views on morality in authentic politics have perplexed some of her readers. She seems to countenance indifference to morality, and even immorality. She contrasts what she calls "human behavior" and political action. Only the former is judgeable by "moral standards" (the quotation marks are hers) that take into account motives and intentions, and aims and consequences. But the only criterion of authentic politics, she says, is greatness, because it is the nature of action "to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary" (*HC*, p. 205). She approvingly cites the funeral speech of Pericles, as presented by Thucydides, in which the glory of Athens is found in the everlasting remembrance of "their good and evil deeds," not their good deeds only (*HC*, p. 206). To be sure when Arendt writes about the insurgent politics of councils, she does not typically refer to glory. Their greatness is equal to or even higher than Greek greatness; their politics is at least equal in authenticity; but the individual and group passion to stand out and then to live forever in men's minds appears not to figure, or to figure very much.

Pericles was in no doubt that some Greek policies were unjust or tyrannical or evil, and Arendt herself is in no doubt that he is correct. Thus it seems clear that Arendt embraces moral inattentiveness as a necessary condition for the greatness of authentic politics. Authentic politics cannot be great, however, if it is too cruel: the reason is that too much cruelty or wickedness of any kind tarnishes glory. Ruthless short cuts violate the spirit of the activity; they are inelegant. Hence we could say that Arendt, like Machiavelli, tends to substitute aesthetics for morality as a restraint on political action. Nothing too awful can be great, but nothing great can be innocent. Her persistent meaning, whether overt or not, is that the principles she adduces as

appropriate to politics are, most of them, not moral in nature. Only “love of equality,” but equality only in a restricted political sense, approaches being moral (“What is Freedom?”, p. 152). There is scant acknowledgment of economic justice, which, just by being economic, cannot be a political commitment. However, Arendt does include solidarity with the exploited as a politically appropriate principle. “But this solidarity, though it may be aroused by suffering, is not guided by it, and it comprehends the strong and the rich no less than the weak and the poor” (*OR*, pp. 88–89). Solidarity is sustained by an idea of “‘the grandeur of man,’ or ‘the honor of the human race,’ or the dignity of man” (*OR*, p. 88). These latter notions are perhaps more aesthetic than moral.

The charge that Arendt excludes morality from authentic politics is reinforced when we consider her analysis of the failure of the French Revolution. In a harrowing account, she attributes the destruction of incipient authentic politics – the face-to-face politics of municipalities, clubs, and other small political associations – to the effort to solve the urgent question of starvation. The revolutionaries were overcome by keenly observed and intensely felt compassion for misery, the misery of hordes of people. The compassion transformed itself, she says, into an abstract pity for humanity, and pity then, in turn, transformed itself into immitigable anger that brooked no opposition and established a despotism that was meant to be radically remedial. Arendt laments the demise of authentic politics at the hands of powerful moral passions and the derivative sentiments. Boundlessness enters the fragile political realm and ruins it. The necessities of sheer life overwhelm the experience of freedom. Thus, Arendt suggests that the great threat to authentic politics comes not from wickedness or even from apathy, but from the profoundly misguided attempt to act from intense moral distress.

Apart from scattered remarks about moral issues as they arise in the normal course of mostly inauthentic but altogether real politics (as we conventionally use that word), Arendt is silent. Concerning the absolute evil of the exterminationist totalitarianism of Hitler and Stalin, she does not think that the validity of moral condemnation has to be demonstrated. Totalitarian leaders and administrators were altogether beyond the reach of moral sentiment; they were not perplexed by moral uncertainty. Indeed, exterminationism is defined by “crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive.” It cannot be traced to even the most “evil” motives, like “self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice.” The initiators and managers of extermination comprised “this newest species of criminals,” and they were “beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness” (*OT*, p. 459). Short of totalitarianism, Arendt spends little time bewailing or examining the effects of “evil” motives. Perhaps she can be

reproached for this avoidance; perhaps she thought other philosophers did the job of ordinary moral scrutiny well enough.

Anyone wishing to exonerate Arendt from the charge of immoralism might go on to say that since her philosophical interest is in authentic politics, and since she excludes violence from it altogether, even if Pericles, one of her heroes does not, then the most problematic kinds of moral questions disappear. However this does not convincingly address the issue of the place of morality in authentic politics. In order to think this response adequate one would have to be utterly indifferent to the effects of deliberation and dispute, to the content of the decisions and the impact they have on people. It may be that looked at from the possible perspective of the political actor, all that matters is the very moment of speech, cut off from what preceded it and what may follow from it. The situation of speech may feel self-enclosed and autonomous, but it is not plausible that even when politics is done in the right spirit, political actors are oblivious to the effects of what they say and decide. It is very hard to avoid the sense that Arendt has produced a utopian picture of authentic politics, a picture cut off too drastically from the very reality of those infrequent episodes of actual authentic politics.

Arendt offers a moral view appropriate to authentic politics which, if unconventional, is perfectly in accord with her determined effort to draw a sharp line between authentic and inauthentic politics, and also to separate authentic politics from other realms of human experience. Her goal is not so much to show that authentic politics has actually been guided by her own view as to infer a moral view that authentic politics can be said to engender on its own and from its very nature. Her moral precepts are “the only ones that are not applied to action from the outside, from some supposedly higher faculty or from experiences outside action’s own reach” (*HC*, p. 246). Just as every game has its own set of rules that creates, shapes, and confines the play, so authentic politics must have its own morality to inhibit and even inspire action. The only alternative to a morality that is internal to authentic politics is, oddly, not the doctrine of the lesser and necessary wrong, but “the ‘moral’ standards inherent in the Platonic notion of rule.” These standards turn out to be based on “a relationship established between me and myself, so that the right and wrong of relationships with others are determined by attitudes toward oneself” (*HC*, pp. 237–238). But, Arendt insists, proper self-rule is no model for interaction with others.

Arendt’s point against Plato, however, does not apply to the claims of ordinary morality. Then, too, Arendt sometimes says that the basic precept of morality is the Socratic adage that it is better for the person, for the person’s inner harmony and ability to live with himself, to suffer wrong than to do it. Obviously, no politics, authentic or not, can accept that adage and still be

politics. Politics is relentless self-preference of a worldly sort; a person or a group acts to prevail or, at least, endure. It would never occur to a committed actor to prefer for the good of his own soul that he not resist or try to overcome; he would never define doing wrong as resisting and overcoming. Ordinary morality, however, does not start with the Socratic adage; it does not make right conduct impossibly costly; it allows worldly self-preference, but only within strict limits. Its frequent situation is not a choice between doing or suffering wrong, but between doing or not doing wrong.

Arendt's proposal is apparently meant to be a sufficient guide to authentic politics. It is striking, however, that the morality that she says is inherent in action should be derived from the "frailty" or frailties of action, not from its excellence. It is as though morality, however understood, tends to be a tax on human endeavors rather than a crowning human achievement, or at least a set of constraints that dignifies what it constrains. In Arendt's theory political morality is an accommodation between action and restraint, with restraint accepted reluctantly, if perhaps magnanimously.

The frailty of political action shows itself in "the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability." She says that "He who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes 'guilty' of consequences he never intended or foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it" (*HC*, p. 233). Thus, some of the features that make authentic politics great – especially the capacity to start something new and unprecedented – account for the need to evaluate greatness morally. Arendt is sufficiently troubled about the flow of unexpected consequences to admit that "Nowhere . . . does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom" (*HC*, p. 234). But then she recuperates her loss by suggesting that it is only an aspiration for an impossible individual sovereignty that could have ever led anyone to think that the effects of their action could be under their total control. It is a terrible error to mistake freedom for sovereignty. Human plurality precludes sovereignty. One may feel that, in making these points, she has perhaps changed the subject.

In any case, from these double-edged features of authentic politics, Arendt distills two moral qualities that are meant, precisely, to assuage "the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability." The faculty of forgiving redeems irreversibility and the faculty of making and keeping promises redeems unpredictability (*HC*, p. 236). She anticipates the objection that forgiveness is practically unheard of in politics, authentic or not. She knows that hoping for forgiveness in politics seems unrealistic because of its association with love, a passion that she steadfastly insists has no place in authentic politics. Forgiveness therefore does not figure very much in her political theory. In regard to promises, what she says in *The Human Condition* deals with,

among other aspects, the salience of the social contract. She says that “the great variety of contract theories since the Romans attests to the fact that the power of making promises has occupied the center of political thought over the centuries” (*HC*, p. 244). Later, in *On Revolution* and “Civil Disobedience,”<sup>4</sup> Arendt returns to the idea of social contract in its varieties and explores it with subtlety and acuteness. In brief, forgiving and being forgiven would lighten the otherwise crushing sense of the ravages of action on oneself and on others; making and keeping promises establishes some stability in an otherwise unsettling and startling ocean of change.

The pages that Arendt devotes to the internal morality of politics really do not add up to a whole morality that is adequate to authentic politics, much less to all other politics. Forgiving and being forgiven cannot withstand the overwhelming force of consequences, not even when all the other aspects of authentic politics are in place. Concerning promises, the content of the social contract is decisive, not the idea of the contract in itself. One can give and keep one’s word, expressly or even tacitly, for all sorts of purposes, including bad ones, even when political action is authentic. The claims of content go hand in hand with the claims of morality, which are not politically originated and which finally cannot be denied. Having said all this, however, I must add that in her treatment of the morality internal to authentic politics, Arendt has produced not a sufficient morality – one must go outside even authentic politics to keep it sane – but, instead, the outlines of a code for conduct. In this code we find some moral virtues that go together with the mostly non-moral political virtues and attitudes we discussed earlier.

Taken as a code, it is inspiring. It extracts from Nietzsche – especially the first and second essays of *On the Genealogy of Morals*<sup>5</sup> – some of his most generous teachings on how the free person gives his word and then keeps it, despite all difficulties; cancels debts owed him and thus in going beyond the law, acts mercifully; accords justice rather than acting out of revenge or resentment; is suspicious of, even dismayed by, the will to punish; and may be said to love his enemies by shrugging off the slights and hurts inflicted on him. She quarrels with Nietzsche over the prominence he gives to the concept of the will to power, but admires his “extraordinary sensibility to moral phenomena” (*HC*, p. 245). She takes from him some invaluable insights into a code proper for free human beings as they undertake authentic political action. Indeed, the code is invaluable for honorable persons, whether or not they want to engage in political action, or have or lack the opportunity to engage in it. Alas, one must repeat that even this great code cannot by itself suffice to resolve all the questions of morality as they have inevitably appeared historically. In sum, Arendt’s view of the place of morality in authentic politics remains unsatisfactory. It is, so to speak, the Achilles heel

of authentic politics. A rather eccentric notion of how morality has traditionally been conceived – namely, as a Platonist relation between one and oneself and, relatedly, as Socratic care for the self – renders morality obviously irrelevant to most politics, authentic or not. Arendt says that “in wanting to be good, I actually am concerned with my own self. The moment I act politically I’m not concerned with me, but with the world.”<sup>6</sup> This conception threatens to efface concern for others – who are not me and not the world – from morality. But such an upshot is absurd. It would be better to draw instruction from Arendt’s theory of authentic politics until the moral question reasserts itself, as it must, and then rejoin common sense and ordinary morality, as did the practitioners of authentic politics, even if only like them, intermittently and without enthusiasm. We can learn from Arendt without endorsing every segment of her theory.

Authentic politics is rare and either episodic or short-lived. The story would not be finished, however, unless we paid a little attention to the advantages of authentic politics. These advantages, too, are part of the effort to restore the dignity of politics. And this part highlights advantages that are peculiar to authentic politics or that emerge from it in a better way or to a greater degree than from other realms of human experience. These advantages make up the intrinsic value of action to the actor, and also the philosopher.

It may be odd to speak of advantages when our emphasis in interpreting Arendt has been on the absence of the role of self-interest in actors. The crucial consideration is that the advantages to the actor cannot be sought, yet do come when unsought, provided, of course, that the political participation is done in the right spirit and for its own sake, and in the right modes of action. A good measure of self-forgetfulness is always needed for genuine action. There is less oddity in mentioning another category of advantages, namely, those to the philosopher who dwells on authentic politics. The philosopher as theorist, observer, even spectator, will take any advantage he or she can from action: the advantage is not personal, naturally, but rather is an advantage to philosophy, to reflection about the human condition. We must also notice that the advantages to the actor and to the philosopher of the human condition alike are not political in nature. The advantages of pure politics are not political. They must be formulated in non-political language. Politics done in the right spirit and for its own sake is immensely valuable for non-political reasons. Hating the tendency to instrumentalize politics, Arendt does not hesitate to make it yield some of its blessings quite outside itself. This is not to deny the existence of advantages that are recognizably political. For example, domestic oppression is abolished or alleviated under the aegis of authentic politics, whether in the *polis* or in a society briefly

governed by councils. (Such liberation, however, is still not positive freedom.) But it may not be irresponsible to suggest that the greatest advantages that Arendt's theory of pure or authentic politics celebrates are experiential or existential; advantages that pertain to the enrichment of individuality and to the stature of the human race.

The advantages to the actor begin with the manner in which taking part in authentic politics confers an identity on him. The theme of identity is carried principally by *The Human Condition*. Arendt insists that a person can achieve an identity only through being seen and heard by his equals as they all deliberate the common fate. One's family or daily familiars or companions do not provide the occasion or the stimulus, Arendt thinks, that allow and even force oneself to show who one is. Who one is, of course, "implicit in everything somebody says or does" (*HC*, p. 179). But full disclosure is possible – if it is possible at all – only in the circle of one's peers in public. One must be pieced together from the various perspectives on oneself that one's equals take. Only my equals can say who I am, and tell me. The public light is the only light strong enough for personal disclosure. And one must not search deliberately for one's identity or otherwise it will not come; self-disclosure is involuntary (*OR*, p. 285); and one must, Arendt holds, remain less known to oneself than to others. But one will be known; without the opportunity of authentic politics, one will pass into death without a full identity. Arendt links identity to immortality, immortal fame; but since many of those who have taken part in authentic politics are to us nameless, the attainment of immortality is out of reach for them. Yet a person can be satisfied with this much knowledge: he has become known in his own lifetime, even if he cannot ever know himself as he is known by others. He is somebody, and not just in his own self-misperceiving eyes.

Other advantages to the actor that figure in Arendt's analysis include the sheer exhilaration of action and, relatedly, the experience of being free. Again, these advantages, if they are to come, must come unsought. They are discovered after participation has begun for the purpose of, say, political liberation. "The charms of liberty," in John Jay's phrase, are discovered only in the action needed to gain it. Revolutionists and insurgents were surprised by joy: "they were not in the least prepared for these charms" (*OR*, p. 33). The exhilaration of authentic political action attaches itself, furthermore, to the experience of being free. Action is freedom. Of course, freedom is shown wherever human creativity is shown, whether in the crafts of fabrication or in works of art or in the exertions of thinking. But the freedom that is experienced in the pursuit of political newness is unlike the other manifestations. Leaving aside the activity of thinking, which Arendt occasionally holds to be the freest of all human endeavors (*OT*, p. 473), we see that Arendt believes

that the experience of freedom is most pure when it arises politically: the political realm is “the only realm where man can be truly free” (*OR*, p. 114). In authentic politics, one may feel free of determination of almost any kind, free of anxiety over necessities, free of rigid rules, free of the limits set by standards of good taste. In authentic politics, spontaneousness best shows itself; spontaneousness is the most joyous freedom.

Identity, the exhilaration of action, the experience of freedom, are some of the intrinsic advantages of action to the actor, when action is authentically political. These advantages are, or come close to being, peculiar to authentic politics, politics done in the right spirit and for its own sake. And they are advantages that are located outside the political realm, beyond liberation from oppression and the usually doomed attempt to construct a constitution that will continuously accommodate authentic politics. The word advantages itself scarcely takes the measure of attained identity, unsurpassable exhilaration, and the experience of freedom.

So much of life is unsatisfactory and yet the remedies seem hopelessly unavailable. Arendt promises that authentic politics can provide a remedy. She speaks of the “instrumentalization of the whole world and the earth, this limitless devaluation of everything given, this process of growing meaninglessness where every end is transformed into a means” (*HC*, p. 157). As long as people lack something they value non-instrumentally in their everyday lives, they will endure meaninglessness, which brings on resentment and alienation. Arendt goes so far as to say that they will be deprived of reality, quite simply. Reality is “the same as appearance” in the public realm. Whatever is denied this appearance “comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality” (*HC*, p. 199). Of course, there is the life of the affections; there may be a consoling and reconciling faith. But Arendt wants her readers to want more than the life of the affections and though she is not irreligious, she certainly cannot spell out any grounds for belief. What does that leave? Surely not the economic life, the life of endless consumption, which converts all things into means out of an unappeasable desire for gratification. Authentic politics fills the gap at the heart of the human condition. The lucky ones who have had the experience of authentic politics may not sufficiently appreciate all that it does for them, and those who through inexperience are oblivious to its advantages must be told by the observer how significant their lack is and how their malaise may arise from such lack.

Finally let us turn to the advantages of authentic politics to the philosopher of the human condition. They go beyond the supply of raw material for stories that illuminate life memorably and thus delight or engross historians and imaginative writers. Perhaps there is no qualitative difference between the advantages that may be scarcely accessible to political actors and scarcely

comprehensible to those who are both unphilosophical and unpolitical, and those arguments that have special appeal to Arendt the philosopher. In any case, we find a number of considerations that recur throughout Arendt's work that help to construct a case for the dignity of authentic politics. These considerations are unapologetically philosophical, and would occur and matter greatly only to philosophers and to poets and to some others who have the ambition to reflect on the human condition, not merely on one or another part of it.

Arendt's deepest philosophical passions are to affirm existence against reasonable or plausible causes for despair and resignation, and to affirm the human stature against those who reduce humanity to just another animal species locked in its nature, and locked as well in Nature. She thinks that authentic politics can serve, uniquely or at least saliently, as the basis for affirming existence and for affirming the human stature. The project of affirmation appears to be and doubtless is Kantian, to some extent; but there is a greater daring and a greater initial despair than Kant showed or had to show. Arendt may be closer to Nietzsche than to anyone else.

The two affirmations are intertwined. Human distinctiveness in relation to the rest of nature is the root of human stature, and it should intensify the wonder that may be felt at the philosophical thought that there is a world at all, rather than nothing. From wonder, affirmation should follow; from intensified wonder, greater affirmation. Humanity alone is capable of wonder and therefore can affirm existence; its own stature is in itself a cause of wonder. Yet it is also alone capable of destructive and self-destructive dejection and hatred of existence. The dejection and hatred may be fed not only by the prevalence of evil and natural suffering, or by the feeling of mortality, or by the experience of meaninglessness, but, just as bad, by all philosophical and scientific theories and systems that are reductionist of humanity, by making it as causally determined and (in principle) as predictable as the rest of nature. Humanity at its best redeems existence; but it may require an extraordinary philosophical effort to affirm humanity. Like the Greeks, we must feel the pathos, but also the grandeur, of having to find our place in a cosmos "where everything is immortal" except ourselves, and thus being alone in receiving the chance and the ability to earn immortality through our "capacity for the immortal deed" (*HC*, p. 19). "Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man" (*HC*, p. 22). Knowledge of one's mortality drives the passion for immortality. Creatures are mere members of various (putatively) immortal species, but every human being is singular and irreplaceable, while also condemned to perish.

The key to affirming the human stature, celebrating the human distinctiveness, lies ultimately in freedom, of which only human beings are capable.

Freedom is supremely present in authentic politics, the politics of beginning something new and unexpected and hopeful. Without such politics, it would be more difficult to find evidence of freedom, though of course not impossible. But authentic politics displays freedom for all to see, if they have the eyes to see. The political activities of freedom release human beings from the hegemony of those fated pleasures yielded by nature. To be content with natural pleasures is to “live and die like animals” (*HC*, p. 19). Arendt is famous for having ranked political action well above labor and work in the scale of the *vita activa*. Labor for the sustenance of life remains immersed in natural processes. Work that fabricates the longer-lasting artifacts and implements may show creativity, but is still bound by specific purposes and indispensable rules. Both labor and work are but preconditions of freedom. Freedom itself is their *raison d’être*, as it is the *raison d’être* of politics (“What is Freedom?”, p. 146). If we say, as we must, that art and science are also manifestations of freedom, Arendt certainly would not deny it; in fact, she insists on it. Yet her interest is to find evidence of freedom in activities that “traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of every human being” (*HC*, p. 5). That leaves only authentic politics, where freedom, with all its philosophical advantages, can be manifested by ordinary humanity, and where the human distinctiveness is thus most pronounced, the human stature most surely evident, and the philosophical shock of wonder at existence is most easily joined to gratitude for the almost ineffable fact that there is a world at all.

## NOTES

- 1 Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).
- 2 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 3 “What is Freedom?” in Arendt, *BPF*.
- 4 “Civil Disobedience” (1970), in Arendt, *CR*.
- 5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969).
- 6 Melvyn A. Hill, ed., *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1979), p. 311.