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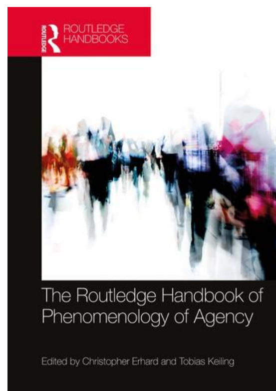

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13

HANNAH ARENDT

Plural agency, political power, and spontaneity

Marieke Borren

Engaging with the work of the philosopher who is best known for her work on the "active life" (*vita activa*), Hannah Arendt, this entry deals with a particular type of agency that is rarely accounted for in phenomenology: political agency.

For Arendt human beings are actors only in particular instances, that is: if one follows the standard account of agency as entailing the capacity for intentional and goal-directed action, which I will call the model of agency as sovereignty. In this model, someone is considered an actor if she knows what she is doing and is more or less in control of the outcomes of her deeds, so that those outcomes can indeed be attributed to the enactment of her intentions (even if granted that she may of course accidentally fail in achieving her goals). According to Arendt, it is only when making things—as *homo faber*, "working" man, in her own words—that people exercise agency in the sense of sovereignty. As embodied beings—*animal laborans*, the "laboring" animal—people are not sovereign, as the unqualified needs of their bodies and its affects are given and fixed. As *pathos*, in the double meaning as passion and suffering, needs and affects befall people. Moreover, the moment people enter the public realm as citizens (*zoon politikon*) and engage in "action" *sensu stricto*, i.e. the very moment that for Arendt apparently is key to a properly human life, they are not self-sufficient either.[1] The political actor "is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin," she writes (HC: 190).

Whereas the non-sovereignty of *animal laborans* precludes political agency, this is entirely different when people act as citizens. Even if they are not sovereign, Arendt does not deny their agency. Nor does she consider political agency a delusion, as if humans were puppets, robots, or vehicles of supra-individual historical or natural forces. She takes great pains to argue that as soon and as long as people act in public space, they are *neither* determined, *nor* themselves determining sovereign actors.

In fact, the temptation to replace non-sovereign action by work and to conceive of political agency in the image of making something—"the traditional substitution of making for acting" (HC: 220)—is as widespread in political theory and praxis as it is dangerous. This substitution is indeed the principal metaphysical prejudice about the active life that Arendt sets out to deconstruct, because it closes down the key condition of political action: plurality. Several manifestations of this prejudice will be touched upon below, because they lead to

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misunderstandings about political agency, particularly the collapse of freedom and sovereignty on the one hand, and of power and violence on the other hand.

Drawing on her two major philosophical works, *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1971/1978), I will demonstrate in this contribution that Arendt conceives of political agency as *plural* agency and untangle why, in her view, agency precludes sovereignty in the public domain and why non-sovereignty is even the condition of citizens' power and freedom when they act in the presence of each other.

The particular type of agency that comes with political action in the Arendtian sense is expounded by juxtaposing it to that of the other human activities. The stakes are further clarified by contrasting it with the predominant aspiration in the philosophical tradition to resolve the frustrating non-sovereignty of action through a number of, what Arendt calls, metaphysical prejudices and fallacies, on the one hand, and to a, mostly (neo-)Nietzschean undercurrent in philosophy that, reversely, puts forward the complete disavowal of the agent (whether or not political), a "doer behind the deed," on the other hand.

The hypothesis that this contribution seeks to defend is that acknowledging Arendt's distinctively *phenomenological* approach of politics is crucial for understanding her account of the question of human agency, particularly political agency. This aspect of her thought renders it an original contribution, not just to the phenomenology of agency, but also to political theory. Arendt's phenomenological perspective is based on an analysis of the lived experiences of the types of human activities which she calls "labor," "work," and "action." The reception of her work has mainly taken place in political theory, probably as a result of the Anglo-American predominance in Arendt scholarship. However, being immersed in the emerging phenomenological movement in German academia in the first half of the 20th century at a formative age, her philosophical habitus is deeply shaped by phenomenological concerns and approaches. Since it does not fit into the phenomenological orthodoxy (i.e. Husserl) and because Arendt keeps her method largely implicit, it took some decades after her death for the phenomenological and hermeneutic inspiration to be appreciated.[2] This inspiration goes a long way in explaining her non-theoretical approach of the question of human agency. She wished to examine human affairs without theoretical (metaphysical and ideological) prejudice, i.e. preconceived ideas, or as she put it in an interview, "to look at politics . . . with eyes unclouded by philosophy" (EU: 2). Her work is committed to understanding rather than explaining political phenomena and to be faithful to reality, that is: phenomenal reality, reality as it appears in the world and so is visible and common to all people. This commitment to reality also made Arendt aversive to any type of wishful thinking, including not just romantic or radical utopianism, but also normative political theory such as ideal theory and normative value theory. In her view, political thinking is not about designing alternative, i.e. better, more just, political orders, nor about justification or prescription.[3]

Therefore, I will start with a reconstruction of the features of Arendt's phenomenology which additionally allows for an introduction of the notion that is key to understanding her account of political agency: plurality. Section "Agency across the human activities" proceeds with a discussion of the distribution of agency and sovereignty across the various human activities. Whereas section "The non-sovereignty of the political actor" highlights the *non-sovereignty* of political agency, contra the metaphysical prejudices and fallacies, section "The doer and the deed" demonstrates its *agentic* dimension, contra (neo-)Nietzschean post-metaphysical thought. The agentic dimension of Arendtian plural agency is finally (section "Political agency: freedom and power") fleshed out by a discussion of the phenomena of power and freedom as the manifestations of respectively the interaction and the initiative dimension of political action.

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Arendt's phenomenological approach to active life

As said, Arendt's engagement with the question of human agency is informed by a typically phenomenological approach. Her œuvre shares several motifs and assumptions with that of other phenomenologists, in particular those working within its hermeneutic branch, while politicizing phenomenology in important respects. Like other phenomenologists, she engages in descriptive analyses of phenomena, that is, of things as they appear to human beings in lived, pre-reflective experience. Like Heidegger in particular, she holds that experience is constituted by an implicit, pre-reflective understanding of phenomena, which comes about through people's familiarity with them in their practical dealings. In contrast to Heidegger, Arendt's work brings out the *political* aspects of human existence—what she calls "the human affairs" to indicate its plural nature—focusing on phenomena such as public space, power, and freedom, in order to uncover the experiences that underlie them. Like other post-Husserlian phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Arendt often takes a *via negativa*, or negative approach, to the phenomena and experiences she investigates. In order to elucidate daily and allegedly "normal" experience, they, each in their own way, attend to the non-everyday: limit cases, pathologies, or more mundane instances in which people's ordinary routines break down. In Arendt's case, the phenomena of revolution, but above all totalitarianism (terror and ideology) are the "unprecedented" experiences that set off her thinking.

Arendt's phenomenological method precludes the empiricist and disengaged perspective which is typical for the majority of social research (including political science), on the one hand, and the theoretical approach that is dominant in political theory and political philosophy on the other hand. Like any phenomenologist, she always takes a relational point of view with respect to the things she studies. The perceiver is not opposed to or separated from the perceived. Things and events are not seen in isolation, as entities or realities external to us. So-called "objects" are always things and events that show themselves to a perceiver and somehow make sense to them. Thus, instead of "objects," phenomenologists speak of "phenomena" or "appearances": i.e. that which appears to a perceiver. The *perspective* the perceiver takes upon things is therefore central to the phenomenologist's attention. In addition to most other phenomenologists, Arendt's emphasizes the *plurality* of perspectives that those who perceive—spectators—take upon the phenomenal world. She stresses that appearance implies the "presence of others" (HC: 50, 95, 188, 199), i.e. of a plurality of spectators, as a matter of course. Appearance is always an appearance *to others* (LOM I: 19). The human "sense of reality" (HC: 208) is guaranteed "by the presence of others, by its appearing to all" (HC: 199). I will call this the *reality effect* of plural appearance and action (HC: 50–51, 95, 199, 208; LOM I: 19). Thus, Arendt infuses the basic phenomenological notion of intentionality with *multi*-perspectivism.[4]

Like most phenomenologists, Arendt's engagement with metaphysics is highly critical. The object of Arendt's deconstructions is the Western metaphysical legacy in political thought, more particularly the prejudices about the active life (labor, work, action) and the fallacies about the life of the mind (thinking, willing, judging) it propelled. The metaphysical prejudice and fallacy most relevant to the issue of agency that Arendt discusses are, respectively, the substitution of making for acting and the "two world theory." The latter, epitomized in Platonism, concerns the presupposition of two worlds, on the one hand the true and eternal world of ideas which is only accessible through thought—Being—and on the other hand the misleading, fluid, and contingent world of phenomena accessible through sense perception—appearance. These two worlds traditionally do not only constitute a

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dichotomy but also a hierarchy, as the first of them is supposed to be of a higher rank than the latter. On this view, that which does not appear to the senses is more significant and true than that which *does* appear. Instead, Arendt asserts the *coincidence* of appearing and being. The human world, for all intents and purposes, is the phenomenal, visible world, which human beings have in common to the extent that is principally open to different perspectives. The dualism of being and appearance is obsolete, since appearances are all people will ever encounter, both within and outside of the political domain; they are simply incapable of telling appearances from being (LOM I: 3–65; Taminiaux 1997: chs. 1–2).

Arendt's deconstructive method, the application of which will be demonstrated in sections "Agency across the human activities" and "The non-sovereignty of the political actor," entails, first, a genealogical investigation of the way the history of political experiences and phenomena is condensed or sedimented in language, that is, either revealed or concealed. Theoretical reflection (in which the mind is oriented to itself as a principle) can never equal the insight that paying close attention to discourse (which is oriented to the world) generates (HC: 94). Like Heidegger, Arendt therefore typically starts her phenomenological investigations with an analysis of concepts, because these provide privileged access to underlying fundamental human experiences, "not because [they] reveal the phenomenon in any straightforward way, but because [they] carry the record of past perceptions, true or untrue, revelatory or distorting" (Young-Bruehl 1982: 405). The aim of such a genealogical project is to disclose the experiences that underlie these concepts in order to achieve a better understanding of the phenomena they refer to. Subsequently, Arendt offers a phenomenological description of their relevance to specific, often conflicting, experiences one has when engaging in active life or in mental activities. Most of the time, Arendt argues, philosophical concepts either express generalizations of particular phenomenal experiences of the political, or amalgamations or confusions of different phenomenal experiences, for instance work and action, sovereignty and freedom, or violence and power. These confusions inform harmful metaphysical prejudices about political life, for example that politics is fundamentally about rule, that political power rests on violence and that sovereignty is its key principle.

Arendt's deconstructions of metaphysical prejudices and fallacies feature two dimensions: critique and experiment. Arendt's work consists in "essays" or "exercises in understanding" (BPF: 14). It has the critical dimension of destruction ("dismantling" (LOM I: 212) and the experimental dimension of storytelling. Through stories, Arendt aims to retrieve forgotten experiences or "lost treasures" (BPF: 4), not just, as is often thought, the political experiences of the ancient polis, but also the modern experiences of revolutions and the institution of civic councils (see section "Political agency: freedom and power" below). Critique is directed toward the past, the given order; experiment toward the future; the new and unexpected which defies what is given. Still, the critical and experimental moments of understanding are connected for Arendt. Critique without experiment results in cynicism ("debunking," BPF: 14), whereas experiment without critique all too easily leads to the kind of utopianism that she seeks to avoid.

After making manifest generalizations and amalgamations, she criticizes them, and subsequently describes the phenomenal distinctions to save the experiences covered up by them. This practice of discrimination— between the various activities within the *vita activa*, power and violence, freedom and sovereignty, the private and the public spheres—is an important, but no doubt the most controversial, feature of Arendt's phenomenology. Understanding for Arendt essentially consists in discriminating: "This is so and not otherwise" (Vollrath 1979: 101). Arendt's distinctions aim at phenomenological clarification. A careful analysis that is to bring out the specificity of distinct phenomena requires discrimination, not generalization.

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For Arendt, distinguishing between experiences does not mean separating them. Distinctions always contain distinct but related dimensions, for example, natural and worldly aspects of one and the same issue.

Because of her phenomenological commitment to descriptive analysis of lived experience rather than theory, Arendt is particularly sensitive to paradoxes, perplexities, and ambiguities inherent in the human condition. This phenomenological attentiveness to the paradoxes inherent in human activities is one of the original features of her approach to politics that generates many novel insights; yet this aspect of her thought is often poorly understood. It has caused Arendt's work, mostly wrongly I believe, to be labeled as conceptually inconsistent.

Arendtian paradoxes express apparently contradictory experiences, yet nonetheless provide fundamental and unexpected insights in the human condition. Real life is full of experiences that appear to contradict each other, but which are not *merely* apparent and hence false. Rather than misconceptions, paradoxes in lived experience express counter-intuitive insight (from the ancient Greek *para-*, counter-, and *doxa*, opinion). The paradoxical experiences are both different (distinct) and related, like two sides of a coin. The irredeemable tension between them "makes sense" on further consideration. Both experiences are "real," i.e. meaningful, and so the ensuing tension cannot eventually be reconciled, explained away or resolved by sound (i.e. logical) thinking or by gaining further (scientific) knowledge. In short, Arendtian paradoxes follow not from theoretical reflection (in which case they would be symptoms of either conceptual inconsistency or theoretical fetishization), but from lived experience itself that her phenomenological descriptions bring to light.

The paradox of plurality

Plurality, arguably the "core phenomenon" in Arendt's thought (Loidolt 2018: 2), provides the most insightful example of Arendt's attentiveness to the paradoxes of lived experience. Since plurality is decisive for the distribution of agency and sovereignty across the different human activities, a brief exposition of the paradox of plurality seems warranted.

Plurality is the key condition of political life, Arendt holds. Without a plurality of people, there is no politics (HC: 7; PoP: 93). Political action, freedom, and power are meaningless unless they involve interaction with other people who are both *equal to* and *different from* me at the same time. So plurality constitutes a paradox, as it simultaneously involves difference and equality (HC: 175–176, 178; PoP: 93). For Arendt, difference refers to individual distinctness or uniqueness; it is what prevents people from being exchangeable. What makes people distinct is that they are situated beings with a unique biography, and with each of them taking a different perspective on the world. Plurality involves alterity, being other than something else, but otherness in itself is not yet plurality since, strictly speaking, copies, specimens, and replicas already possess this quality of alterity. Distinctness can only be enacted in and through speech and action "in the presence of others," that is, in public space, or what Arendt calls the "space of appearances" (HC: 199). Human beings are not born as unique individuals, but only individuated through interaction with others. Neither is equality a natural given, such as an inalienable property that all human beings allegedly have, by virtue of being born (natural law doctrine) or because they are created equally in God's sight (the biblical doctrine of equality). For Arendt, equality is a political notion, in that it is entirely artificial or conventional. Like difference, public space is needed for equality to be enacted, for it only comes about the moment people interact with others who are irredeemably different from me.

Equality should not be confused with *sameness*. Sameness indicates the naturally given similarity of human beings. As *animal laborans*, human beings possess a shared biological

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constitution that accounts for a limited number of basic needs. Indeed, as *animal laborans*, "we are all the same," to a large extent. Plurality means that as soon as people enter the public sphere, they obtain and grant equality by showing in words and deeds their particular perspective of the world vis-à-vis one another. Put differently: political equality pertains to people who are by nature unequal as a principle (HC: 205). The paradox of plurality implies that difference (distinctness) is not opposed to equality but that the two mutually presuppose each other. In fact, both equality and distinctness are opposed to sameness. Equality, indeed, presupposes that a person is equal to a *different* person. If human beings were all the same it would make no sense to pursue equality. In the same way, relevant differences can be identified only with respect to the norm of equality.

Agency across the human activities

The purpose of the previous section has been to foster appreciation of Arendt's phenomenological approach to political phenomena. This section discusses Arendt's descriptions of labor, work, and action—in order to explore the implications of this approach for the questions of human agency and sovereignty. The if and how of human agency depend on the particular mode of human action that people engage in (labor, work, action), and the typical mentality (*animal laborans*, *homo faber, zoon politikon*) and accompanying orientation to their environment (the earth, the thing world, and the immaterial world of the human affairs) that they take up in the exercise of these activities.

In their capacity as laboring, consuming, care-needing and -giving beings, human beings approach their environment as *animal laborans*. This environment is earthly nature. As specimens of the human animal species, *homo sapiens*, human beings are embedded in earthly nature and embodied. All human activities (labor, work action, and including the activities of the mind, thinking, willing, and judging) are earth-bound, but nowhere is the correspondence between humans and the earth stronger than in labor. Like every other organism, the physical constitution of humans is adapted to the (climatological, geological) conditions of life on earth and its natural resources. Arendt calls the earth "the very quintessence of the human condition" (HC: 2). On account of their embodiment, human beings are subject to what is *given*: earthly conditions and the needs and vulnerabilities of their bodies and its affects and passions: the human condition of "life itself" (HC: 7).

Labor encompasses the activities that serve the self-preservation of the human organism, both on the level of the species and the individual, e.g. typically food production and consumption, reproduction, housekeeping, and care. The products of labor are consumables. They literally merely feed back into the laboring process itself. As a consequence, labor is endless in the double meaning of the word: devoid of a purpose beyond itself and as a principle never finished. The natural needs of the human body are cyclical and continuous, and can never be satisfied once and for all. As soon as I have cleaned up and tidied the house, dirt and junk start to pile up again; eating and drinking only suspend my becoming hungry and thirsty again. From the perspective of life itself, bearing children merely enables my children to bear children in their turn (HC: 30–33, ch. III)

Life itself is typically experienced as coercive—we don't control it, it controls us—fixed and unchangeable. It is, in the words of Judith Butler, "unchosen" (Butler 2012, 2015).[5] As embodied and therefore vulnerable, passionate, and affective beings, people are subject to the facticity of "sheer passive givenness" (HC: 208).

Moreover, people's inner life, with its affects and passions, is quite literally invisible. It does not appear to different others. In fact, the person's inner life is even opaque to itself.

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It does not appear to itself in introspection and needs the detour through the phenomenal world to gain solidity and a sense of reality. Due to their unworldliness, needs and affects escape their being shared with others. This is the solipsism of *animal laborans.* The non-communicability of extreme pain is a case in point. As it is deprived of the "reality effect" of appearance to others, one's inner life may have the same "weird"—unreal or surreal—quality as dreams or nightmares. As reports of experiences of solitary confinement and exile confirm, people need the world and others to redeem the "darkness of the human heart" (HC: 237, 244; LOM I: 35; BPF: 144): its contradictions, ambiguities, equivocalities, volatility, and unreliability.

Labor is a non-individuating activity. Torturers know only too well that the body's susceptibility to suffering, pain, and pleasure is more or less uniform, and cases of extreme destitution seem to show the same. Qua *animal laborans*, differences between people merely pertain to alterity, not to plurality, as people lack the individuality that distinguishes them from others and that allows for equality and being-together to come about in the first place (LOM I: 35, 72). The variety of unqualified human bodily needs and affects is significantly more limited than the diversity of humans' outward appearances (of course these affects are transformed if people give shape to, for example, their sex drive, fear (LOM I: 35–36), or even hunger,[6] i.e. make them *visible* in the world by articulating and sharing them with others).

As the most "pathic" mode of being in the world, *animal laborans* is neither sovereign nor agentic. This is entirely different in the case of *homo faber*, that is, human beings' experiential position and mentality whenever they engage with the world in the mode of *work*, the activity of making (producing, manufacturing) things (HC: 34–42, ch. IV). If ever people enact sovereign agency, it is in this mode. Based on a phenomenological analysis of the lived human experience of strength (including violence), Arendt calls *homo faber* "the lord and master of the whole earth" (HC: 139). Working implies having a clear purpose or end (a product) in mind, determining and calculating the means necessary to achieve it, drawing up a plan and subsequently executing it, following particular rules or procedures. The results of work are both predictable and reversible: what is produced can as a principle be undone, or otherwise artifacts simply decay if they are not maintained.

Homo faber, the "builder of worlds and the producer of things" (HC: 160), brings into being the thing world or the artifact, including furniture, buildings, infrastructural works, institutions, culture, and technology. Together these man-made things constitute the human home on earth. Arendt calls the human condition that corresponds to work "worldliness" (HC: 7). It represents the elements of artificiality and utility in human existence. Humans take an instrumental or utilitarian orientation to the world in the mode of *homo faber* because working involves tailoring means to given ends. The reification and de-naturalization inherent in the activity of work provide a stable and durable foundation for human life to protect them against natural forces. Although this durability is relative—man-made things are obviously subject to decay—it is more stable than both nature and the immaterial world of the human affairs which are equally ephemeral as a matter of course.

Thanks to its mastership and authorship, *homo faber* possesses sovereign agency. To the extent that they belong to *homo faber*, people know what they are doing, they are self-sufficient and in control as a principle, because they are able to predict and reverse the things they make. However, they do not have *political* agency, because work is not pluralistic.

The activity Arendt calls *action* is the only truly political one among the human activities, because it is only in action in public space that plurality can flourish. As citizens, *zoon politikon*, human beings display an entirely different type of agency than they do when appearing

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as *animal laborans* or *homo faber*. Partially a sufferer, a pathic and hence passive creature like *animal laborans*, the citizen is non-sovereign; partially a doer or active being like *homo faber*, she is agentic, at least potentially. Unlike both of them she has the potential to develop political agency.

Arendt's genealogy and deconstruction of the concept of action in antiquity reveal two aspects of its lived experience which sets it apart from both labor and work: initiative (*archein/agere*) on the one hand and enactment (*prattein/gerere*), its reception and continuation by others on the other hand (HC: 189).[7] Arendt speaks of *initiative* because action always involves beginning, the start of something new. Action has no given end like work and always constitutes a surprise, an interruption in the course of events. This is the "miraculous" quality of action, although there is nothing super-natural about the unexpected happening.

Second, action always implies *interaction* (as I call the dimension of enactment) as it takes place in the presence of and together with others—co-actors and spectators—by definition. Therefore, action requires a public space of appearances: a space to show oneself in deed and word to others who are different, to be seen and heard by them, while they mutually expose their uniqueness and achieve equality: the paradox of plurality.

No matter if they agree or disagree, people bring about a shared world of meaning, and "sense of reality" when they start to act. To clarify the "reality effect" of plural action, it is helpful to contrast the activity and "world" of action with those of work. Whereas work is a world-*building* activity, that makes the thing world, action is a world-*disclosing* activity. Contrary to the tangibility of the thing world that people create in their capacity as *homo faber*, the world of the human affairs that action discloses is entirely symbolic or discursive. It is the public and common space of stories, opinions, judgments—in short: of shared plural meanings—that weaves a "web of relationships" between people (HC: 181).

To explicate the practice of world disclosure, Arendt's uses the metaphor of illumination, more particularly the lighting of a stage. The metaphor illustrates the basic phenomenological assumption that phenomena—in Arendt's case political phenomena—always appear against a background of concealment (HC: 71; OR: 98). In addition, spotlights serve to lighten up a person or an act in a play, by providing focus. This example also shows that in the process of world disclosure, individuals disclose *themselves* as political actors as well, even if the "disclosure of the agent in speech and action" (HC: 175) is not the intended purpose of action and speech.[8] Only by acting in the world do people individuate, according to Arendt (HC: 97; EU: 23). In sharp contrast to phenomenologists such as Heidegger, she emphasizes that sharing, interpreting, judging, and discussing one's opinions and evaluations *with others* are indispensable for world disclosure. By "talking about" (HC: 183) things and events (which involves the perspectives of others as a principle), people make them meaningful, i.e. disclose their meaning.

The non-sovereignty of the political actor

To expound on the notion of plural agency and to show what is, and is not, meant by the non-sovereignty of Arendt's political actor, it will be contrasted, in this section, with dominant tendencies in the metaphysical tradition (driving home the discussion of the deconstructions of the metaphysical prejudices and fallacies in section "Arendt's phenomenological approach to active life") and with the disavowal of agency in neo-Nietzschean anti-metaphysical thought in the next section.

Arendt takes issue with the traditional identification of political agency and freedom with sovereignty: "[S]overeignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership,

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is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men inhabit the earth" (HC: 234; cf. BPF: 163). The non-sovereignty of the political actor is the flipside of the potential greatness of action. Acting presents people with frustration, risk, and frailty. The failure to achieve one's aims is not accidental, as it would be in work. Why so? Action is not endless, like labor (which keeps people moving within a closed or vicious circle, the eternal return of the same), nor is it finite like work (in which the end product brings the working process itself to a closure, too), but open-ended. This indeterminacy allows for great deeds to happen, but it is also a constant source of its frustrations (HC: 183, 190, 233; EU: 23).

Adventure and venture in one, action is uncontrollable. Every deed weaves a new strand into an already existing web of relations and meanings that precedes it. Action is boundless, because it almost always sets into motion a chain reaction, in which every reaction is a new action in itself (HC: 190). The consequences of a deed do not cease with the deed itself, they lag behind. It may augment and build upon itself like a snowball effect, for better or worse. Its consequences may also boomerang back. Unlike God (at least in monotheistic religions), human beings are incapable of controlling the if, what, and how of the outcomes of their deeds. Only when acting completely solitarily, in the vacuum of a laboratory, could one at least hypothetically control the results of one's deeds. In real life, however, people will never find themselves in such a situation, because they always act in a plural world. One should note that Arendt does not consider non-sovereignty a weakness. The political actor's non-sovereignty does not follow from her primary dependency on others for survival, like human beings indeed simply cannot do without the help and care of others in their capacity as *animal laborans* (HC: 234).[9]

Because of the human condition of plurality, action is, first, marked by unpredictability, because it is impossible to secure its consequences and meaning in advance. Citing Luke 23:34, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," Arendt points to the daily and common human experience that people cannot foresee the future, whereas the consequences of what people do or say will (or fail to) be felt exactly there (HC: 239; cf. HC: 233, 237, 240; EU: 23). People's knowledge is deficient as a principle when they engage in action. It is impossible to know all the intentions and motives of the others involved, because they do not appear in the world. The latter is equally true of people's own intentions and motives. Introspection cannot ascertain them, since they are, just like passions and affects, part of one's *inner* life. They are unreliable and volatile as long as they do not appear in the world and become visible to all (OR: 98).[10] In addition, others have motives of their own as well, and since action as a principle takes place among (many) others, these may thwart one's plans, redirect, enhance, or attenuate them. As a consequence, unexpected things may happen which transcend the original intention (BPF: 84; HC: 184, 201; EU: 320).

Plurality, second, ensures that people cannot undo what they have done or said, hence the feature of irreversibility. For example, one cannot choose to live in a world in which European powers had never launched imperial conquests and settler colonialism.[11] The irreversibility of action also holds for one's own past deeds, even if most of the time the impact of them is felt only by a handful of people.

A final frustration of action is "the anonymity of its author" (HC: 220). Because of the plural nature of action, no one ever accomplishes something entirely on his or her own, not even the likes of Gandhi, Rosa Parks, or Mandela nor dictators such as Hitler, Stalin, or Mao. To the extent that action is brought about by heroes and heroines, the latter are like protagonists in ancient Greek tragedy: both doers and sufferers of the consequences of their deeds rather than solitary and self-sufficient strong wo/men.

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Traditionally, philosophers have overwhelmingly responded to the frustrations inherent in action with either hostility or despair. If the meaning of events and deeds can never unequivocally be attributed to the intentions of individual actors, and if acting humans hardly ever achieve their goals, as history proves time and again, then history is a meaningless and sad affair, the argument goes. To save meaning, philosophers such as Hegel, Marx, Smith, and, in some respect, Kant (i.e. in his philosophy of history) resort to the two world doctrine which Arendt considers the foundational metaphysical fallacy. They explain away human agency entirely by transferring it to the anonymous collective agency of forces that transcend the human affairs such as History (be it of the *Geist* or of class struggles), Nature (Kant's "ruse of nature"), or the Market (Smith's "invisible hand"). These collective intentionalities are assumed to rule behind the scenes (i.e. the visible world of the human affairs) and through or behind the backs of the individuals who are seen as merely executing the "rule by nobody" (HC: 44–45; cf. LOM II: 154–155, 179, 180; EU: 430–431; LOM I: 95–96; BPF: 82).

More importantly, in political praxis the frustrations of action very often, and understandably, rouse the temptation to replace political action by work and to conceive of political agency in the image of the sovereign agency of *homo faber*: the metaphysical prejudice of the "substitution of making for acting." For work, precisely unlike action, *does* have a clearly recognizable actor in control and its course is predictable and reversible.

Totalitarian rule is the epitome of this prejudice. Like the carpenter who processes wood to make a table, totalitarian regimes treat human beings as the material to be processed and transformed. The identification of politics and rule is not the prerogative of totalitarian regimes, though. It is reflected in the technocratic or neoliberal discourse in liberal democracies that reduces politics to governance, management, or administration. Another case in point is the surge of "strongman politics"[12] and worship of authoritarian populist leaders, the fiction of the one strong wo/man (HC: 188–189) that the world currently witnesses. Whatever the specific constellation, the substitution of making for acting destroys plurality as the key condition of politics.

The doer and the deed

Does the notion of political agency still have any credibility if one accepts (and even embraces) the non-sovereignty of action, as has been advanced in the previous section? To many post- or anti-metaphysical philosophers, most notably Nietzsche and his followers, it does not. Because of her emphatic deconstructions of metaphysical prejudices and fallacies in favor of the appearing world and actor, Arendt's account of action has often been put on a par with Nietzsche's. In his *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche famously denounces the presupposition that action needs a foundation. In his view, language, i.e. grammar, seduces people into believing that there is an actor behind acting: "'The doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (Nietzsche 1969: 45). Especially in the 1990s, neo-Nietzscheanism abounded within radical democratic theory. Judith Butler made Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical or -foundational thought fruitful for her feminist and queer concept of performativity and her radical critique of sovereign agency (Butler 1990: 25). Within Arendt scholarship, the agonistic theorists, Dana Villa and Bonnie Honig, read Arendt's account of action through the lens of Nietzsche's aestheticism (Villa 1996; Honig 1993).[13] In this section I will argue against this reading.

To make this argument is not to deny the significant parallels between Arendt's and Nietzsche's thought. Indeed, like Nietzsche, Arendt believes that the actor does not exist independent from the act, at least in the domain of political action. Action, she writes, is "sheer

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actuality" (HC: 207, 208), i.e. phenomenality. In *The Human Condition*, she argues that the doer appears in the doing. In acting in public space and talking about a worldly issue, the actor discloses "who" she is. This who refers to the actor's distinctness, her unique and incomparable life-story, as opposed to "what" she is, the sum of her given, unchangeable, and objectifiable features, including markers of collective identity such as gender and ethnicity. Arendt compares the political actor to the protagonist of a story or an actor performing in a play: someone discloses herself in acting on stage. The who which appears is an effect of interaction and appearance in deeds and words rather than a project, the reception of which the actor can manipulate, control, and master completely (HC: 175–181; LOM I: 37).[14]

The argument of the disclosure of the person in action that Arendt makes in *The Human Condition* is consistent with the non-expressivism of appearance she defends later on in *The Life of the Mind*. Here she argues that the appearance of the actor does not imply the expression—literally: "pressing out"—of "'something inside', an inner disposition or quality of the person" (i.e. what she used to call the "what") or "an idea, a thought, an emotion" (or a motive or intention, I would add). Appearance in the Arendtian sense is self-referential, because "it 'expresses' nothing but itself" (LOM I: 30; cf. idem 29; BPF: 144). The dualism between the actor's invisible inner life and its outward appearance, together with the assumption that the former is more real and causes the latter, is but another version of the metaphysical two world theory that needs to be deconstructed in Arendt's view.

These parallels go a long way to explain the neo-Nietzschean "performative" and aestheticist reading of Arendt's notion of agency.[15] However, such a reading sits uneasily with the equally consistent emphasis Arendt puts in *The Human Condition* on the "actualization of the sheer passive givenness of [men's] being" (HC: 208). She describes who one is as "the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech" (HC: 181), and a "latent self" that manifests itself by acting (HC: 175; cf. idem 208, n.41). In *The Life of the Mind*, she even more explicitly argues that appearance is something which humans take upon themselves *actively*. Appearance in a politically meaningful sense hence transcends merely or passively appearing; it takes a deliberate effort to *make* one's appearance in speech or action on stage. Reversely, interaction in public always implies not merely "self-display," but "self-presentation" in deeds and words (LOM I: 34). Decisive for the disclosure of the who is the active, conscious, and deliberate choice of how one wishes to appear, "what to show and what to hide" (LOM I: 34), and of what one thinks is "fit to be seen and what is not" (LOM I: 36).

These arguments are not symptoms of residual metaphysical foundationalism or essentialism, or of a relapse into the model of political agency as sovereignty, but they follow from Arendt's political-phenomenological take on the actor. Even if Arendt considers Nietzsche one of her strongest allies in deconstructing the two world fallacy, as Villa and Honig rightly point out, the latter ignore the phenomenological rather than the aestheticist background from which Arendt's foregrounding of appearance arises. For Arendt, performance pertains, not to performativity in Butler's sense, but to the *disclosure* of the world and the person, and to the enactment or interaction dimension of action. Most of all, it is *because of the human condition of plurality* that "action almost never achieves its purpose" (HC: 184). Far removed from the solipsism of the Nietzschean master, the aristocratic "exceptional man" and his celebration of the individual will to power, she argues that although the doer *chooses* to make her appearance in deeds and words, she does not *determine* the meaning of these deeds, because that is in the eye of others, i.e. its audience of co-actors and spectators (HC: 10–11, 178–188, 193, 206, 211). This is the paradox of suffering and doing.

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Arendt believes that people *do* have motives and intentions; these are not merely delusions created by language, history, nature, or the market. The disclosure of the person in action does not imply that its appearance is a false belief, as Nietzsche thinks, or a facade, caused by false consciousness, as Marx holds (HC: 183). Motives may incite people to take initiative, one of the indispensable elements of action. However, the relation between motives and deeds is *contingent* because one never acts alone, in other words: because of the human condition of plurality.[16] It is the *world* instead of a self-sufficient actor that solicits action:

> When I make [the] decision [to appear to others], I am not merely reacting to whatever qualities may be given me; I am making an act of deliberate choice among the various potentialities of conduct which the world has presented me.
>
> *(LOM I: 37)*[17]

Political agency: freedom and power

To flesh out the agentic dimension of Arendtian plural agency, this section will expound two main features of action: its typical mode of freedom—spontaneity—and its mode of power—citizen empowerment. The former corresponds to the aspect of initiative, the latter to interaction.

Action is not *necessary* like labor, as it does not serve self-preservation, nor is it *useful* like work, because it has no exterior purpose, i.e. a product. Instead, the meaning of action is *freedom*. Arendt rejects the identification of political freedom and sovereignty and argues that the two are in fact mutually exclusive: "If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce," she writes, because "in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same" (BPF: 165).[18] Instead, spontaneity—or natality—is the type of freedom people exercise when they act within the space of appearances. Whereas the principle of freedom as sovereignty implies controlling the outcomes of one's deeds—the agency of *homo faber*—the principle of freedom as spontaneity refers to the initiative dimension of action: the human capacity to begin, to initiate something that did not exist before and which cannot be deduced from precedents or a preconceived ideology. Because of its spontaneity, action is both fundamentally contingent *and* inherently open and creative.[19] Contingency and freedom are therefore closely related. The uncontrollability and contingency of action rule out complete causal determination. On the one hand, to exercise agency does not mean to cause the outcomes of one's deeds and words. On the other hand, action is not causally determined, either by "the system," one's past or by one's genes, not even by one's motives or goals. As fundamentally spontaneous, action resembles improvisation. It is independent, i.e. not bound by rules, protocols, procedures, or models such as the work of *homo faber*.

Arendt learned about the fundamental spontaneity of human action through a *via negativa*, namely her analysis, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), of life in the concentration camps of the Third Reich. She writes that it is exactly human spontaneity that totalitarian regimes try to eliminate, by pairing ideology and terror, including horrific medical experiments. The concentration camps "serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified" (OT: 437), including the experiment of turning human beings into "conditioned and behaving animals" (HC: 45). Under non-totalitarian conditions, however, real life never takes place in a laboratory but is always lived among others. Human beings can never be completely reduced to interchangeable "bundles of reactions" (OT: 438), i.e. organisms which completely obey a stimulus response

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model, like puppets or robots (OT: 438, 455–457) whence "spontaneity as such, with its incalculability, is the greatest of all obstacles to total domination over man" (OT: 456).[20] The ineradicability of human spontaneity and indeterminacy eventually brought to Arendt's attention the human condition of natality as the principle of plural freedom and the initiatory dimension of plural action (OT: 478–479). The eventual failure of the experiment in the camps to reduce human beings to "mere life," i.e. *animal laborans*, informs her descriptions, not just of action but of labor and work as well. For instance, it taught her to appreciate the artificiality of the thing world that *homo faber* creates.

The reduction of freedom to sovereignty is a version of the substitution of making for acting. Holding onto this deeply unrealistic view of freedom, the failure to keep control in the public realm may drive people to despair and cause them to withdraw from the public world altogether (as for instance in Stoicism), which comes at the expense of the human sense of reality (HC: 234–235).

There is a close link between Arendt's description of freedom as spontaneity on the one hand and power on the other hand. Both are opposed to sovereignty. Political power is what emerges whenever people mobilize and organize around a particular worldly issue, in short: when they engage in non-violent "action in concert" (HC: 199–200; CR: 95, 98, 143). Arendt's description of this phenomenon closely resembles "empowerment," as this concept captures the positive and active, i.e. *inter*active, dimensions of the power of citizens.

Arendt unravels the lived experience underlying power by, first, genealogically investigating the ancient Greek and Latin concepts of *dynamis*, *potentia*, and *energeia*, demonstrating that each of them refers to "enactment" (HC: 200, 206; cf. VA: 252, 261–262) and, second, by studying modern European and American history. She describes how throughout modern history, usually in the slipstream of revolutionary upheaval, voluntary associations of citizens, sometimes federally connected into council republics, surface spontaneously every now and then, to vanish, at least for that moment, after some time.[21] For Arendt, power consists in a potential—a "potentiality in being together" (HC: 201)—that may be actualized whenever people start to act together. Like action, power only exists in its enactment. Genuine political action is almost always short-lived and small-scale; yet the possibility of making a new beginning is never exhausted. This potential is always there to be re-enacted by citizens at any time in history and in any place.

Political power is not a property of an individual or a group, like sovereign power, as it is dependent upon interaction between different and equal citizens, i.e. "upon the unreliable and only temporary agreements of many wills and intentions" (HC: 201). The power of citizens does not rest on a homogeneous collective, such as "the people," in sharp contrast to Rousseau's conception of "indivisible" sovereign popular power. Arendt is of course aware that in daily speech, "power" is often used to refer to the authority of an individual or a small group of individuals, for example a head of state, the executive, or any other type of leader. However, saying that someone is "in power" means that she is *empowered* by people to act on their behalf. In other words, the power of a single person is derivative of the pluralistic power of action in concert.

The experiences underlying power are completely different from those underlying violence—strength and force (HC: 200ff). Both in political theory and praxis, power and violence are often identified, another example of the substitution of making for acting.[22] In political theory, the model of sovereign power serves as the basis of justifications of the necessary use of violence in politics. For modern "realist" political theorists from Hobbes to Weber, state power ultimately rests on the legitimate use of violence. Against this view, Arendt argues that the derivative power of the state erodes when it no longer rests on the

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plural power of citizens. State violence crops up whenever the plural power of acting citizens crumbles. As a consequence, the use of violence is a symptom of impotence, not the condition of power. Very much like realist theorists, many radical political theorists, such as Rousseau, Marx, Sartre, and Fanon, attribute an instrumental role to violence in politics, as the means to create a new—free, more just—society, sometimes even a new man. When this ideological view of power and violence spills over into revolutionary praxis, it usually leads to glorifications of violence (CR: 105–198).

Arendt's works offer a wealth of case studies of "spontaneous rebellions" (HC: 216 n.52), citizen councils and associations, civil disobedience, and civil rights movements that illustrate the phenomena of freedom and power in action. The Hungarian revolution (OT), the US civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the student protest movement, and the antiwar movements of the 1960s and 1970s (CR; EU: 22) are but some cases she describes in detail. Similar examples which occurred after Arendt's death include the eastern European dissident movements and "velvet" revolutions of "1989," and the protest movements of "2011" (Occupy and the "Arab Spring").

What these examples have in common is that teach of them were non-violent movements that were launched spontaneously and mostly to their own surprise by citizens gathering in public space. These movements mobilized people with very different backgrounds and political views, often without even a formal affiliation to a political organization and did not have formal leaders, nor a shared ideology.

Conclusion

Arendt repeatedly observes that the political actor is as much a sufferer as a doer (HC: 184, 190, 233–234). She rejects the model of political agency as sovereignty for its disregard of the plural and worldly quality of action. Collapsing the political agency of citizens and the sovereignty of *homo faber* leads to a destruction of plurality. She is equally far from asserting that the political actor is powerless, or fictitious, on account of her awareness of humans' spontaneity, the ineradicable capacity to make a beginning, and the inexhaustible power potential inherent in action in concert. Arguing that political power is generated by irreducibly different individuals who act in concert, Arendt brings forward an account, not of collective, but of plural agency. Also, political agency cannot be reduced to the model of agency as resistance. The power of citizens is not limited to challenging given states of affairs (as in many contemporary agonistic democratic theorists who draw on Arendt's account of action), but also includes the capacity to set into motion *new* states.

Arendt's account of political agency contains important lessons for both phenomenologists and political theorists. Arguing that appearance always implies appearance *to*—different yet equal—*others*, she brings the condition of plurality to phenomenological notions of agency. On the other hand, thanks to her phenomenological approach she provides a non-theoretical perspective to debates on agency in political theory. This approach explains her sensitivity to the paradoxes inherent in the human affairs. These paradoxes point not to Arendt's conceptual inconsistency or to a theoretical obsession, but to lived experience *itself*. For example, doing and suffering are different but inseparable experiential dimensions of political agency, corresponding to the aspects of initiative and interaction.

This approach also leads her to reject normative theory and to embrace, what I call, a particular phenomenological kind of "realism." It helped her to demonstrate that the model of political agency as sovereignty is as "unrealistic" and illusory as is the complete disavowal of agency. Arendt's realism does not imply a commitment à la Hobbes and Weber

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to *Realpolitik*, nor does it follow from cynicism, or from resignation to what happens to be the case. Instead, it implies "the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be" (OT: viii). This disposition is consistent with Arendt's phenomenological habitus of taking seriously the *res*, the matter or issue, that one examines—the "things themselves"—and of being faithful to reality as it appears in the world and so is visible and common to everyone.

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, the word "citizen" is used to refer to humans in their capacity as "political animals" (*zoon politikon*), rather than to formal membership in a state. In this usage, even an undocumented immigrant may be a "citizen," namely as soon as she starts to act politically in public space.
2 However, recently, the first systematic treatment of Arendt's phenomenology was published, the excellent book by Loidolt (2018). Among the earlier exceptions is the work of Vollrath (1977, 1979) and Taminiaux (1996, 1997, 2000). Also see: Birmingham (2006), Borren (2013), Hinchman and Hinchman (1984, 1991), Mensch (2009), Ricœur (1983, 1992), Topolski (2015), and Vasterling (2011a, 2011b).
3 On Arendt's commitment to a "proto-normative" "phenomenological form of practical reason," that is attuned to the "ethical demands" implicit in the human activities *themselves*, see Loidolt (2018: ch. 6).
4 See Arendt's discussion of Husserl's conceptualization of intentionality (LOM I: 45–46).
5 From her earliest to her most recent work, Butler has challenged the model of sovereign agency. Whereas in her early work on performativity her arguments were inspired by Nietzsche's disavowal of a 'doer behind the deed' (see section "The doer and the deed"), her recent arguments against sovereign agency draw on Levinas's work: human beings are not sovereign, because of their shared condition of vulnerability and precarity and because of their "constitutive dependency." This perspective informs her reading of Arendt's work on action (2012, 2015). Even if Butler shares with Arendt the assumption that the body and life itself are given and passive, she criticizes Arendt for excluding the suffering and vulnerable body from political, on account of her supposedly rigid distinction between the private and the public spheres. This criticism partly rests on a misunderstanding of the phenomenological background of Arendtian distinctions (see section "Arendt's phenomenological approach to active life"), partly on fundamental disagreements (see section "The doer and the deed" below).
6 See Arendt's example of the labor movement in HC: §30.
7 In HC, Arendt translates *prattein/agere* as 'achievement' (189). In her own German translation of HC, she uses the verb *vollziehen* (substantive: *Vollzug*) (VA: 235), which translates as enactment, performance, or actuality. Cf. Loidolt (2018: 87, 201–202).
8 The disclosure of the actor is closely related to the appearance of the "who," as will be argued in section "The doer and the deed."
9 Arendt attributes the physical dependency argument against human sovereignty to the metaphysical tradition "since Plato" (HC: 234). However, note that Judith Butler's argument against sovereignty rests on exactly the same assumption, i.e. constitutive dependency (Butler 2015).
10 As a consequence, intentions and motives do not constitute "who" we are according to Arendt, because the who appears in the world, as will be argued in the next section.
11 The fact that, obviously, the impact of imperialism is felt with different intensities across the continents and has various meanings for different individuals in no way contradicts Arendt's account of world disclosure, because of its *multi*-perspectivism.
12 I borrow this phrase from Barack Obama's Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, delivered on July 17, 2018, in Johannesburg.
13 Recently, Villa has reconsidered Arendt's "Nietzscheanism" (Villa 2008).
14 On the disclosure of the person and storytelling, see Ricœur (1983).
15 Arendt most explicitly draws a parallel between action and performance in HC and BPF.
16 For a similar argument, see Zerilli (2005: 11–13, 17).

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17 Taminiaux (2000) also takes issue with a reductionist "performative" reading of Arendt's description of action, on the basis of a phenomenological reading.
18 On the distinction between sovereignty and freedom, see Mensch (2009: 97, 106–08, 110). Unlike Arendt (yet like Butler), however, Mensch takes the non-sovereignty of political freedom to be a function of humans' physical interdependency.
19 For a phenomenological account of the relation between contingency and freedom in Arendt's work, see Vasterling (2011b).
20 Arendt's aversion to behavioristic conceptualizations of human activity should no doubt be seen against this background. Interestingly, Arendt suggests that spontaneity is already inherent in humans' embodied existence, i.e. "life itself," however limited. On the other hand, she says that the prototype of a fully conditioned sentient being, Pavlov's dog, was "perverted" by humans in the scientific experiment conducted on it, suggesting that normally, non-human animals also possess at least a certain degree of spontaneity (OT: 438). In *The Life of the Mind*, she even goes one step further by arguing that no sentient being is ever fully conditioned by its instincts, i.e. life itself. Non-human animals also have some sort of agency, albeit not political agency (LOM I: 26–37). These arguments demonstrate the *phenomenological* character of Arendt's distinctions between human and non-human animals on the one hand and between the body and political action on the other hand.
21 Note that the power of citizens acting in concert seems to be a typically *modern* phenomenon for Arendt, which gives the lie to her alleged nostalgic yearning for the ancient polis.
22 See Ricœur on the opposition between power and, what he calls, domination (Ricœur 1992: 194–97, 256).

Acronyms of works by Hannah Arendt

BPF: *Between Past and Future* (1961)
CR: *Crises of the Republic* (1972)
EU: *Essays in Understanding* (1994)
HC: *The Human Condition* (1958)
LOM I: *The Life of the Mind I (Thinking)* (1971)
LOM II: *The Life of the Mind II (Willing)* (1978)
OR: *On Revolution* (1963)
OT: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)
PoP: *The Promise of Politics* (2005)
VA: *Vita Activa oder vom tätigen Leben* (1960)

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