

“Flying Spark of Fire”: Thinking (and) Action in Hannah Arendt

Eno Trimçev, University of Greifswald

Abstract

This article rethinks the space between the ontological and historical registers of Hannah Arendt’s thought. In a first step, the article moves against Arendt by arguing that her ontological analytic of new beginnings cannot support an account of politics. In a second step, the article moves against Arendt’s intentions but within her thought to undermine her divide between action and thinking by understanding both as instances of human experience. Finally, the article moves with Arendt to recover a language of experience whose terms gain meaning only in relation to one another for they have neither a strictly universal nor a strictly particular character. As an articulation, this language interweaves the creative insights of the ontological register into historical experiences thus remaining loyal to the Arendtian project.

Keywords: Arendt, thinking, action, experience, existentialism, hermeneutics

It has long been noted that Hannah Arendt’s thought moves along two registers: one ontological and the other historical. The former, famously worked out in *The Human Condition*, attempts to lay out the formal structure of the free, self-constitutive nature of human existence. The latter seeks to understand particular historical events as in *Rahel Varnhagen* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, as well as to make the case for a political science dedicated to understanding human events in the manner of the *Essays in Understanding* and *Between Past and Future*. These two registers have brought forward two conceptions of action: one that centers on the miracle of beginning and the other on the associative acting in concert. Accordingly, readings of Arendt have co-

lesced around two poles that I will here call existentialist and hermeneutic.¹ While not every reading falls comfortably within one of these poles, they do form the tensional space within which Arendt's interpreters continue to move.

This article suggests rethinking this space by problematizing a consensus that existentialist and hermeneutical readers share with each other and with Arendt, namely the divide between action and thinking. By re-describing action *and* thinking as human experience in and of the world, the core insights of the conflicting interpretations – the free, self-constitutive nature of experience and the task of understanding its meaning – are retained in a mutually complimentary relationship. My interpretation asserts, however, that experiences cannot be understood without a view of the non-appearing ends to which they aim. As a result, against existentialist interpretations, we gain a vocabulary of thinking experiences instead of an ontological analytic of appearance. And, beyond hermeneutic interpretations, we can reconcile Arendt the arduous student of historical events with the disinterested philosopher of human experiences.

To this purpose, the article proceeds in three steps. The first part assesses the respective strengths and weaknesses of the two interpretative poles. The challenge that emerges is to think politics without the ontological analytic of appearance while retaining the core of Arendt's reflections on spontaneity. The second part responds to this challenge by way of a thought-experiment: An analogy between acting and thinking reveals both activities as instances of human experience, that is, transformative movements in *and* beyond the world as it is given to the senses. With regard to the concept of action, this perspective displaces the focus from both the miraculous beginnings and the associative processes of acting in concert to the formative ends of action towards which experience aims. The third and final part specifies the status of these ends and recovers a language appropriate to integrate them in our thinking about politics with the aid of Arendt's fragmentary "Introduction *into* Politics" (Arendt, 2005). While by no means sufficiently worked out, this language proves more appropriate to the challenge of moving *between*, not *along*, the thought-registers of Arendt's work.

In displacing her ontology of appearance, this article moves with Arendt beyond Arendt. It moves with Arendt insofar as it advocates interpretations that begin from, and always return to, political phenomena. However, it moves beyond Arendt by challenging her divide of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. By initiating a way of speaking about human experience that continuously gestures beyond its sheer facticity, Arendt finally cleared the way for a kind of thinking that never lets go of the historical materials yet boldly thinks its way beyond them, towards what she, quoting Solon, called the "non-appearing measure" (Arendt, 1971: 429). It is in light of their own "non-appearing" measures that experiences can be judged as reasonable or unreasonable. It is here, I believe, that Arendt exceeds her own self-characterization as not being a philosopher.

I. Existentialism against Hermeneutics?

Existentialist and hermeneutical readings each develop along one of two registers of Arendt's thought.² A first, ontological register illumines the structure of human appearing in the world. I call these readings existentialist because they are concerned with the analytic of human existence as such. A second, historical register is concerned with understanding particular historical events and personalities. I call these readings hermeneutical because they are concerned with the manner in which Arendt interprets historical phenomena. Existentialist readings privilege the radical amoral thinker of *The Human Condition* with its ontology of appearance and self-constitutive action while hermeneutical readings privilege the interpreter of historical personalities and events of *On Revolution* or *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Initially, existentialist interpretations contributed to Arendt's chequered reputation in American academia due to the perceived illiberal repercussions of her thought (Wolin, 1983; Kateb, 1983). In the early nineties however, theorists like Dana Villa (1992; 1996) and Bonnie Honig (1993) rehabilitated the ontological register. They successfully showed the radically new in Arendt's account of politics: the primacy of action with its ontological analytic of appearance. If these themes initially troubled the moral or institutional sensibilities of some readers, existentialist interpretations in a third phase recovered an account of ethics through Arendt's ontology of "eliciting self-display, mutual responsiveness, and provocation" (Curtis, 1999: 189). Existentialist interpretations have matured by bringing her thought to bear on some of the most urgent problems of our time: the misconception of properly political activity and the concern for the emancipatory potentials concealed by our routinized, administrative politics.

While existential readings focus on action as *agere*, as a spontaneous and creative beginning, hermeneutical readings accentuate action as *gerere*, the achievement of an act by the many (Arendt, 1998: 189). They draw attention to action's associative force to thicken or renew intersubjective bonds. The resulting "communicative", "accommodational" or "narrative" models of action highlight processes of mutual understanding (Habermas, 1977; Fuss, 1979; Benhabib, 1996). True, a particular strand of this literature mobilizes her thinking for the theory deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1983; Benhabib, 1994: 47). Yet, by labeling the readings "hermeneutical" I wish to highlight their common concern for the historical situatedness of Arendt's concepts. Hermeneutical readings generally take to heart Arendt's call to begin our political thinking from our experiences and always to return to them (Arendt, 1979: 308). This allows hermeneutical readings to deflect charges of relativism and opens the way to elaborating Arendt's methodological innovations (Disch, 1994; Borren, 2013).

Over time, the impossibility of ignoring the self-constitutive and creative core of Arendt's conception of politics as well as its deepening in an ethical direction may have given existentialist readings a slight edge. Whether they decry the allegedly illiberal repercussions of her thought or, more often, embrace the politicizing promise of her account for our apolitical times, existentialist readings have brought to light the uniquely Arendtian contribution to political thought and contributed to her resurgent popularity.

Old as this quarrel has been, the voices for overcoming it have not been lacking: existential readings may stay closer to the heart of Arendt's thought, but they consign her thinking to what Habermas (1977: 9) called "extreme cases." With Arendt, they transpose the universal analytic of existence into an account of politics. At times they even deduce "truly" political acts *from* Arendt's ontology (Villa, 1996: 29–32). Existential interpretations are in the predicament of making the historical a universal condition of human action yet remaining blind to actual, historical events. Consigning most of human history to phenomenological darkness, they contradict the first rule of Arendt's teaching: understanding politics must begin from the self-understanding of the actors for "only the sources themselves talk" (Arendt, 1994: 325). While hermeneutical readings elide the ontological heart of Arendt's thinking, existentialist readings remain stuck in its heart – the famous chapter on action of *The Human Condition*. As a result, they cannot but be radical, which puts into question the nature of that radicalism.

Yet, settling the quarrel faces an obstacle: each side draws its strength from the same motivation that drove Arendt. They both chart out alternatives to the modern encroachment of means-ends rationality into the public realm. Existentialist readers aim to displace popular conceptions of politics as a predictable, administrative process that resembles Arendt's account of work rather than action. Hermeneutical readers, on the other hand, oppose the same victory of means-ends rationality in favor of a more dialogical account. From this point of view, the quarrel is faithful to Arendt's thought; hence its immense productivity and endurance. But, at the same time, it places our thinking about our "darkest of times" in a dead end. Either contemporary thinking is forced on the messianic track of waiting, with Arendt, for a moment of new beginning that will emit "the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light" (Arendt, 1973: 9) of meaning or it is forced in the quixotic track of unfolding alternative modes of being and politicking in the world, as if these modes were simply there. Are we condemned to a purely instrumental, process-driven life in what Arendt termed "the social" if those theoretical alternatives to means-ends rationality do not succeed?

It is my conviction that to stay loyal to Arendt's thought requires confronting seriously its existential dimension because appearing in the world forms the central part of her analysis of human existence (Benhabib, 1996: xiv). But,

as Benhabib also rightly adds, to be an Arendtian also means to understand human actions starting in their sheer historical facticity or to "integrate the political with the philosophical, the ontological with the historical dimensions" (Benhabib, 1996: xviii). We face a contradiction: while studying politics means understanding particular political events, the historical languages of politics supposedly cover up the process of their own coming-into-being. Arendt attempts to overcome this contradiction through her ontological analytic of a politics of the miraculous beginning free of will and intention; of power free of violence; of performance free of ends; of promising and forgiving but firmly beyond "good and evil" (Villa, 1996: 99). Politics is thus displaced *tout court* from the tangible world of everyday, bounded, intentional, violent, end-seeking beings, to the unreal world of their mode of coming-into-being. This account is simultaneously beyond history yet within the transformative grasp of historical change. But the ontological analytic of the necessarily historical existence of human beings is, of course, ahistorical. Aware of this difficulty, Arendt goes back to pre-philosophic Greek experience. Yet, Periclean Athens can be as close to a historical approximation of "the existential-ontological structure of humans" (Benhabib, 1996: 110) as beings can ever get close to their own mode of constitution, that is, not at all. Unsurprisingly, her ontological analytic remains extraneous to the Greeks' political language. Hence, her ontology of appearance, contrary to her actual *amor mundi*, subtly subverts historical experience; no wonder Habermas noted that Arendt's empirical investigations focused on "extreme cases". Historical experiences may be ranked by how nearly they approximate her ontology; Pericles was better than the American founders who understood what they were doing better than the Jacobins who at least acted to open up political possibilities to which our administrative politics is almost wholly closed to. It turns out that political actions do not "exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself" (Arendt, 1998: 206) after all. This celebrated quote at the heart of existentialist readings loses its meaning when historical actions are hierarchized according to the ontological register.

I do not argue here that Arendt's ontology is wrong but simply that ontologizing politics is impossible in her own terms for two reasons. First, to think from ontology towards a politics however subtly is to subject politics to fabrication – the cardinal sin of traditional theory according to Arendt. To demand a politics of ruptural beginnings out of one's thinking about the structure of human existence is as nonsensical as, say, to demand a Platonic sophocracy out of one's theoretical valuation of Being over Becoming. Secondly, Arendt's thought itself demonstrates that there is no other way to understand politics than immersing oneself into the historical materials. But the materials, of course, do not lay bare the formal structure of their coming-into-being and the actors that institute them do not stabilize them through the analytic of

promising and forgiving. Even the metaphor of a “gap” between the materials of history and the mode of their coming-into-being is a misleading metaphysical hangover for it holds out a promise which thought cannot fulfill: that it is possible to claim that something like the “Action” chapter of *The Human Condition* can say something about a politics.

II. Action and Thinking as Experience

In the previous section I analyzed the particular strengths and weaknesses of the two poles within which Arendtian readings move and I showed that their differences are related to their accounts of what Arendt is doing while she is conceptualizing action. Very broadly put, readers who think historically tend to draw out of Arendt’s text a fitting account of politics and readers who come to her texts imbued with the more existential themes of freedom and alienation in the context of modernity latch on to her analytic of beginnings. One’s *thinking* about the world prepares the way for one’s account of *action* in the world. Since receptions of Arendt hit an impasse by looking directly at her account of politics, I use an analogy to sketch an alternative account. The analogy between action and thinking makes it possible to think about action in the non-ontological vocabulary Arendt uses for thinking. It thus establishes a new perspective on the old problem of Hannah Arendt’s account of politics.

My argument in the following recovers an account of action that combines the strengths of the two registers of her thought. This thought experiment brings to the fore both action and thinking as experiences. They share a similar ontological structure of radical new beginnings and non-appearing ends. However, the pedantic description of that common structure illustrates the lack in Arendt’s analytic of appearance. Fortunately, the Arendtian project may be understood as dedicated to bringing experience back as the human mode of moving about in the world. The task is therefore not to think *against* means-ends rationality, as if there was *a part* of reality that stands *apart* from it, but to reintegrate it in our experience of and in the world.

There are only two activities that Arendt (1978: 181) calls “experience” – thinking and action – although she firmly separates the two. For her, thinking is a non-appearing experience carried out in solitude that negates the public realm, while action is the experience of appearing in public inspired by the presence of others. The first is essentially apolitical – although at times it can be anti-political as in much of traditional philosophy and at other times intensely political, albeit in a negative sense as “*a kind* of action [...] when the chips are down” (Arendt, 1971: 446, my italics). The second *is* politics.

For Arendt, the dichotomy between action and thinking is anchored in the opposition between this-worldly common sense and other-worldly thinking. Common sense makes meaningful the context in which every new appearance occurs. By making this-worldly reality a repository of meaning, it enables responses to it in speech and deed. By contrast, thinking takes attention away from what is happening in the world; it makes the thinker "absent-minded" (Arendt, 1978: 53). The one is world-immanent; the other is world-transcendent. Thinking is not only inattentive and so rather apolitical, but it "de-realizes" (Arendt, 1978: 49) what common sense makes real – the very precondition of politics. Thinking *moves* at the moment of withdrawal from the apparent world in the non-appearing infinite, beyond all knowledge, all remembrance and all seeing "with the mind's eye" (Arendt, 1971: 424). It moves in a "region" (Arendt, 1978: 23) outside the world of appearances (Arendt, 1971: 423–4); it "soars" in the "heights" (Arendt, 1960: 3). This "invisibility" renders it "the extreme opposite to the eminent, the blazing visibility of action" (Jonas, 1977: 39). Readers of Arendt have followed her lead and generally agreed with Kohn's (1990: 124) conclusion: "the split between thinking and acting is radical and complete." The few partial or implicit exceptions (Jonas, 1977: 41–2; Steinberger, 1990: 810; Parekh, 1981: 121–23; Bradshaw, 1989: 81–2; McClure, 1997; Villa, 1998; Taylor, 2002) have not pressed the insight, perhaps unwilling to stray too far from Arendt's explicit intentions of keeping the two separate.

The upshot to the "intramural warfare" (Arendt, 1971: 425) between thinking and common sense is that Arendt *must* endow politics with qualities that assert its independence against the potential encroachment of the social from the side of the *vita activa* and of thinking from the side of the *vita contemplativa*. In the Arendtian account, politics *qua* action thus becomes primary, pervasive, autonomous and architectonic in human existence. It is primary insofar as it signals the active insertion of the actor in the world "like a second birth" (Arendt, 1998: 177) and hence it is intrinsically linked to natality and the capacity to begin. It is pervasive insofar as human beings cannot opt out of acting and hope to remain human in any meaningful sense above bare biology. It is autonomous insofar as the human movement in the world is self-sufficient – its beginning is miraculous and its limit is inherent to the practice through taste, founding, promising and forgiving. Finally, it is architectonic insofar as the movement in the world shapes the world, endowing it with meaning, institutions and cultural products. Action is thus granted the primary privilege of shaping the home – work and labor shape the world too, but in far less significant senses – in which human beings dwell and within which the meaning of things is negotiated. Albeit boundless and creative, Arendtian politics then is a complete system although, unlike more classical systems, hers is like a field of energy fluxes that enliven and contextualize the fabricated and natural parts

of the human world. There are activities that human beings carry out outside of action, but only in and through action can a properly human life come into its own and be recognized as such.

Yet, there are many markers in the text to indicate that the distinction is not meant at face-value: a life without thinking, Arendt tells us, “is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive.” Unthinking men, she goes on to say, resemble “sleepwalkers” (Arendt, 1977: 191) just as men that are incapable of action. She designates both politics and thinking as “experiences”; she draws an equivalence between each and human life; and she implicates them both in the quest for meaning. I hereby proceed to examine the similar dynamics by which action and thinking begin and are kept into existence.

Thinking and action come into being analogously. Like action, thinking is simultaneously triggered by events and experiences in the world and yet remains wholly undetermined by them. Thinking is aroused by events in the world for it is nothing other than “the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass” (Arendt, 1971: 418). Yet, like action, thinking is a rupture from the very events that triggered it. Thinking and action both *occur* in the Arendtian sense, that is to say they are singularities that encompass multiple sides or stand-points. They are neither caused by anything that went on before, nor willed by the mind to achieve some result. As such, both are features of the human condition of natality; thinking is “[exercised] in every sane person”, Arendt tells us, as an expression of the human “inclination” to “think beyond the limitations of knowledge” (Arendt, 1971: 421, 422). This movement of thinking beyond the given – determined by nothing outside of itself yet impossible without the things outside of itself – is fully analogous to action’s expression of the human capacity to begin something new.

Secondly, having come into being in an analogical manner, the experience of thinking sustains itself similarly to action in three ways. Firstly, like action’s reliance on sense-perception, thinking is aided in a radically undetermined manner by memory which is a “similar vision within” to what sense perception is “without” (Arendt, 1971: 423–24). Thinking recreates the visual character of the acting movement in the world by “[dealing] with objects that are absent...an object of thought is always a re-presentation...by virtue of imagination...in the form of an image” (Arendt, 1971: 423). Secondly, thinking recreates also action’s condition of plurality by “transferring” the experience of appearance to the “two-in-one” dialogue “between me and myself” (Arendt, 1978: 185) that holds throughout the thinking experience. Indeed, Arendt says “[n]othing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists *essentially* in the plural than that his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself [...] into a duality during the thinking activity” (Arendt, 1978: 185). Thirdly, like action, thinking is not beholden to consequences and results,

for its essence is an *energeia* that "[moves] about" (Arendt, 1971: 429); that liquefies all given concepts as it sets out to find their meaning. By pushing beyond everything that is given in its own movement, thinking, like action, undermines "all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil" (Arendt, 1971: 434).

Finally, thinking cannot come about without speech: "[o]ur mental activities [...] are conceived in speech even before communicated, but speech is meant to be heard and words are meant to be understood by others who also have the ability to speak" (Arendt, 1978: 32). It "is in no way different from men's need to tell the story of some happening they witnessed" (Arendt, 1978: 78). If thinking cannot be thought without speech then, *pace* Arendt, it is implicated in the opposite of withdrawing from the world: "The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of appropriating and, as it were, disalienating the world" (Arendt, 1978: 100). It bespeaks of the human condition of being in but not of the world. Crucially, appearing in the world is inscribed in the very nature of thinking for the activity is nothing but the illumination of word-things (courage, justice, home etc.) without which the uniquely human way of moving about in the world would be impossible. Arendt's description of thinking as worldless by way of its "turning-about" (Arendt, 1978: 84) from appearances follows from her choice of a spatial metaphor to designate her perspective of viewing the *vita contemplativa* from the perspective of the *vita activa*; thinking only appears to be worldless, but appearances at times do lie.

Hence, for Arendt, thinking moves in the space between that which is given – the event that triggers it – and the Solonian "non-appearing measure[s]" (Arendt, 1971: 429) whose meaning all thinking seeks. This space overlaps with the space of action by virtue of the word-things that the acting man requires to move about.

All these characteristics indicate the core similarity between thinking and action that makes it possible to speak of them as analogous activities: their free, self-constitutive nature. Like action, thinking is an uncaused or miraculous movement. Indeed, thinking *is* movement – a "traveling through words" (Arendt, 1978: 185). For Arendt, it is a mode of presencing thought-things, not a technique that submits to rules of logic. We can understand thinking only in the way we understand action – by participating in the original experience, not by dissecting it externally – for it yields no objective achievement and aims to persuade none but the thinker herself (Arendt, 1978: 110). Arendt's texts are peppered with terms like "admiration," "confirmation," "affirmation," and "love" to describe the movement of thinking (Arendt, 1978: 151, 178) in a manner that recalls her vocabulary of "actualization," "participation" or "augmentation" of action. All thinking is a "confession of a need" (Arendt, 1978: 166) to go beyond what one sees and hears, Arendt tells us, which is

precisely what action is. As such, they both ought to be understood as that peculiar human movement which generates its own dynamics “to keep it in reality” (Arendt, 1998: 205).

The analogy allows us to not keep the two activities separate, but to consider them as instances of the particularly human way of being and moving about in the world. Our experience of the world is triggered by what happens in the world, yet it remains free of the world’s determinations; it moves beyond what is given in the world but it remains tied to it by virtue of speech, memory, and sense-perception; it constitutes our unique perspective of the world yet it is sustained by the plurality which Arendt says constitutes the human condition. Against existential readings then, experience rather than the appearance of *The Human Condition* ought to be our subject-matter. But, against hermeneutical readings, we cannot ignore Arendt’s analysis of the free, self-constitutive nature of human experience for it constitutes the moving core of her thought.

III. Reconsidering Action in Light of the Thinking Analogy

Having given up the clear divide between thinking and action, I can turn to the repercussions for our understanding of politics. In the final part of this essay, I first look at the odd, propertyless status of the “non-appearing ends” in Arendt’s account of thinking. Then I establish their presence in political activity by analyzing her post-humously published “Introduction *into* Politics.” The ends and principles of action in that text, I argue, have the same status as the “non-appearing ends” of thinking. This view sublates the analytic of action from *The Human Condition* in an account that remains fully implicated in action’s historical situatedness.

As Arendt sees it, the non-appearing measures – or the “flying spark of fire between two flintstones” (Arendt, 1990: 101) that emerge in thinking – are formative of the thinking experience by giving it a broad directionality and making one’s solitary thinking intelligible to others. Thinking, she tells us, “is a kind of desirous love,” an act in pursuit of “lovable things – beauty, wisdom, justice, and so on” (Arendt, 1978: 179). If thinking is a loving movement, then it is “a kind of motion, and all motion is toward something” (Arendt, 1996: 9). This does not mean however that the “lovable things” await thinking’s exhaustive assessment; indeed, they are not “things” at all. Instead, they emerge within and orientate our everyday movement in the world. To take Arendt’s example, Euthyphro’s claim in Plato’s eponymous dialogue that he is pious inspires Socrates to ask, “What is piety?”. Socrates uses this question in order to dissuade Euthyphro from prosecuting his own father. But the dialogue becomes meaningful only insofar as the question of piety is asked boldly – i.e. abstractly

– and not so as to find some clever trick to avoid a court case. In other words, the question becomes meaningful because Socrates acts-in-thinking. The instrumental concern excites the thoughtful dialogue that never quite leaves its world-immanent concern; Socrates, after all, has a deeply personal reason for engaging in the dialogue given his own impending trial for impiety. Thinking, here, is another form of venturing forth in the attempt to cope with the reality in which human beings find themselves. The question of the site of thinking is circular: thinking does not escape the materials of history for it occurs through them; yet the materials cannot contain their meaning within themselves without thinking's move to disclose them. This is what Arendt means when she says that human beings are "totally conditioned existentially", yet "can mentally transcend all these conditions" (Arendt, 1978: 70–1). Socrates' speech neither flees in another "region," nor is it determined by the immanent context. It is free.

To see how this aspect of thinking is also shared by action, I turn to Arendt's "Introduction *into* Politics." The fragments which Arendt wrote in German and were later translated in English subtly displace the ontology of action by a conceptual matrix that does not promise such a formal analytic: *Zweck*, *Ziel*, *Sinn* and *Prinzip* (Arendt, 2003: 126–9), in the English translation rendered as end, goal, meaning and principle (Arendt, 2005: 194–5). The translation of the first two as end and goal is perhaps unfortunate as goal and end in English are far more synonymous than *Zweck* and *Ziel* can be in German. *Zweck* clearly evokes instrumental rationality and may be better rendered as "purpose". *Ziel*, on the other hand, can be rendered as "aim," "goal" or even "end." The latter better allows for the level of abstraction that Arendt endows on the term as I show in the following.

The manuscript reveals the following matrix of action: its tangible purposes (*Zweck*) which are what it wants to achieve, lie outside it, and gain reality as the action is concluded; the less tangible ends (*Ziel*) as the "directives" (Arendt, 1969: 97) by which actors orient themselves by judging what they are doing – they also lie outside it, but, in contradistinction to purposes, they are reenacted concretely; the intangible meaning (*Sinn*) of action which is revealed only in its course, and is internal to the acting movement, and; the less tangible principles (*Prinzip*) which, like its ends, are outside of action but, unlike them, contextualize the acting movement as "the fundamental conviction that a group of people share." They inspire the action "from without" (Arendt, 2005: 194–5; 1961: 152). Action, thus, is constituted of "the [purpose] that it pursues, the [end] which it has in mind and by which it orients itself, and the meaning that reveals itself in the course of action" and the principle from which it "springs from" (Arendt, 2005: 194; 1961: 152).

This matrix seems to open up far more questions than it provides answers. Certainly, it is far less elegant than Arendt's earlier ontological analytic. I be-

lieve that any attempt to integrate its four terms into a formal structure of action – by which action *qua* mode of being is grasped in its entirety – is doomed to break down under its own inconsistencies. Here I read them expansively, more concerned with following the punch of Arendt’s argument. Along this line of thought, the problematic of action indeed shifts from moving *along* the ontological register, to moving *between* the ontological and the historical register. In this text, Arendt gives the only account of politics that thought can give us: a partial and contingent illumination of *our* politics; an account that is not open-ended by design as in *The Human Condition*, but open by the very nature of the narrative in which it unfolds; in other words, a *political* philosophy.

This “matrix” of action cuts across conventional fault lines of investigation. The principles (*Prinzipien*) and ends (*Ziele*) of action play a crucial in-between role in Arendt’s boundary blurring: they are not quite as intangible as meaning (*Sinn*), yet not as tangible as purposes (*Zwecke*); they are concretely reenacted like meaning, yet outside of action like purposes; buried deep in the self-constitutive dynamic of human life, yet decisively existing only through individual, situated acts. To increase the confusion, each nod in the “matrix” may change places with each other for “[w]hat was a principle of action in one period can in another become [an end] by which the action orients itself, or even [a purpose] that it pursues” (Arendt, 2005: 195). The “matrix” is only half-buried in – and continuously moving out of – the ontological register. Not only do end and principle remain wholly particular and contextual, but the continuous shifting of places shifts our attention from the existential focus on miraculous beginnings to interpreting experience understood as the continuous transformation of concrete purposes, ends, meanings and principles into each other. Each action stages all of them at once by taking up other actions and changing the positions of their nodal points. The matrix has no *beginning* in a part of it that can be investigated *apart* of the moving reality. The experiential movement locks together the disparate parts of the matrix into an articulation within which they gain their contingent, ever-changing meaning.

In this reading, the ends and the principles of action have an analogous status to the non-appearing measures which unfold through and orient the thinking experience; indefinites with an in-between status, simultaneously “in” and “out” of experience. Through them, the acting movement retains the free character with which human action is endowed in *The Human Condition*. This concept of action can thus retain the very strengths of existentialist readings of Arendt that the first part of this article highlighted. Nevertheless, this freedom cannot be reified as a mode of being whose formal structure may be grasped by working out an appropriate ontological analytic. Therefore, this concept of action remains responsive to the core insight of hermeneutical

readings of Arendt: The ends calibrate one's striving towards the purposes in a manner that is political, i.e., public, by constantly raising in the mind of the actor the principles of action. They can only be seen in their "concrete realizations" and hence "are constantly changing" (Arendt, 2005: 193). Principles too share this non-appearing sense and form the measure of the *polis* towards which action sustains itself. As "the fundamental conviction that a group of people share" (Arendt, 2005: 194–5) these are the non-appearing measures by which we recognize a group of people as a society. They *both* "go beyond or transcend what is done in the same sense that every yardstick transcends what it has to measure" (Arendt, 2005: 194) as they continuously bring up the "non-appearing" pole towards which action tends. But, they also both "[become] fully manifest only in the performing act itself ... [and]...are manifest in the world as long as the action lasts, but no longer" (Arendt, 2005: 152). Viewed from a perspective internal to the actor, the actor doubles within herself as a spectator that continuously judges the appropriateness of action. The ends indicate the actor's need to be in harmony with her own inner spectator, in a manner that recalls the harmony of thinking's "two-in-one." Viewed externally, the ends of action respond to the principles of society that emerge in the concrete reenactment of public life. From this perspective, the actor is continuously responding to events in order to bring about a better state of affairs, no matter how narrow or magnanimous her purposes may be. That is, she begins something new by reaching out towards her particular purposes in a manner that concretely brings to light the non-appearing principles of society, which emerge as ends in her judgment. These ends give sense to the beginning; without them, the venturing forth would hollow out into a senseless beginning. The circularity of this continuous harmonization that is the human drama gives it a coherence, substance and depth that are often missed in existentialist readings.

In order to see how this account coheres and at the same time deepens the analytic of *The Human Condition* consider Arendt's famous example of Achilles in the "Action" chapter (Arendt, 1998: 193–4). Recall that there Arendt differentiates between *agere* ("to set into motion"/"lead") and *gerere* ("to bear"/"see through") aspects of action. *Agere* designates action's miraculous beginning by the actor and *gerere* its finishing "by seeing it through" (Arendt, 1998: 189) in the company of others. Thus, Achilles begins his solitary action and kills Hector, but the action comes to fruition only as the Greeks tell its story. Here Arendt emphasizes the radical nature of *agere* by outlining its ontological structure in order to restore its nobility vis-a-vis *gerere* which had come to displace it over time. Consider now the same act through the categories of "Introduction into Politics." Achilles venturing forth in the teeth of the prophecy of his death made evident to the observing Greeks the gap between the principle which was supposed to bind their actions, "immortal fame" (Arendt, 2005:

195), and their actual performances. The act of Achilles attained its meaning by evoking that yardstick among those Greeks that were still spiritually bound to each other through the principle thus (re)establishing the community. He would not have carried out his act had he not believed that he would attain immortality in the eyes of his compatriots (Arendt, 1998: 134). Had his end been in disharmony with the (social) principle, his act would have been an ignoble vendetta to be shunned by friend and foe alike. The act cannot be made intelligible without its relation to ends and principles; without taking into account the experiential complex through which Achilles discharged his purpose. And there is no way to form this account except by immersing ourselves in the materials of the Trojan War in order to understand what the Greeks were doing. Whereas *The Human Condition* may leave us under the impression that our job is to theoretically recover *agere* from its oblivion, this later conceptualization of action holds us under no illusions of theoretically clearing up the process of presencing but directs our attention to the presences that are directly accessible to our interpretative intelligence. What I have called its nodal points of ends, principles, purposes and meaning cannot be understood outside of their contingent relational arrangements in historical actions. Because taken separately these terms have little internal structure, they are perhaps best understood as exegetic terms in Arendt's attempt to illuminate her own meditative movement beyond the sheer facticity of action. The awkwardness of this new articulation that displaces the exuberant ontological analytic of *The Human Condition* is not, I believe, a comment on its barrenness but an unfinished gesture beyond the dichotomy of the former analytic.

This broad directedness and intercontextuality of action is present, albeit obscurely, even in *The Human Condition*. Consider, for example, the only place in the work where meaning becomes topical as an indexed entry.³ In that entry, meaningfulness is part of the explanation for the insufficiency, *viz.* meaninglessness of utility. Arendt notes that all societies judge in terms of some "ideal" that "can no longer be conceived as something needed in order to have something else; it simply defies questioning about its own use" (Arendt, 1998: 154). This ideal is beyond all intentions, acts, circumstances and contexts although it is revealed only through this multitude of particularities. It is, I believe, equivalent to what she later calls the principle of society as the measure that makes life in common possible; otherwise, our intentions, acts and speeches would tear society apart, "[f]or an end, once it is attained, ceases to be an end and loses its capacity to guide and justify the choice of means, to organize and produce them" (Arendt, 1998: 154–5). Unfortunately, Arendt does not press the insight any further.

The non-appearing measures which action tends to are formative of action. The world from which action springs and to which it returns via its ends and purposes arises as a principle in the moment of action; a "flying spark of

fire" between act and context, existing only in-between and through these. In that moment, society displays its own organizing principle to itself – to its members and to those that are attempting to understand it. Arendt tells us that "[m]en organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities found within or abstracted from an absolute chaos of differences" (Arendt, 2005: 93). Participating in political life – and understanding a political life – cannot be thought of without these commonalities and abstractions that the participating activity unfolds. The invisible commonalities do not "hold" the community together like Roman keystone arches; they invite participation by making it possible to think about and act towards a better or prevent a worse state of affairs. If they do not unfold in participation, political life is reduced to bargaining or warring interest groups.

The organizing principles of society that shine forth like "flying sparks" in action reveal the world itself as a dynamic, moving reality. Reality has a movement of its own, independent of the particular wishes or actions of any of its members: "[w]herever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them" says Arendt (2005: 106) suggesting the precarious autonomy of the world from the individual actions that constitute it. World and person are bound together by experience in such a manner that none constitutes or exhausts the other but both are nourished by the other making each what it actually is. World is always more than the person sees in it for as he moves beyond the given reality in action he finds out that he is never beyond the world; never free of good and evil. Vice versa, worldly relationships are unable to define the person for human life is radically incapable of exhausting itself in the sum total of its worldly relationships which it transcends by virtue of living. Just as there are human beings who thrust themselves in the world by virtue of their "second birth", so there is world which thrusts itself on human beings as concretely reenacted principle that is more, deeper than the sum total of human actions. This connection which is almost imperceptible yet pervasive in human society, is of the highest importance for "[s]trictly speaking, politics is not so much about human beings as it is about the world that comes into being between them and endures beyond them" (Arendt, 2005: 175). As Arendt put it when speaking of the Greeks and Trojans, "there is an element of divinity" (Arendt, 2005: 166) to the political community. Politically this may be evidenced in the community's self-understandings or the sheer seriousness in which its common business is transacted. But, philosophically this divinity only emerges as the community is understood as reaching out beyond itself, disclosing the principles in the light of which it measures its own actions. This principle is not unproblematically *there*; it can be found nowhere outside of the effort to understand a community, *an* event, or *a* political act.

IV. Conclusion

In this article I have questioned the divide between action and thinking and thereby discovered something of action's movement missed by that divide: its broad directionality and contextuality towards world through action's "non-appearing measures." The argument has shown that thinking action in light of its broad directionality simultaneously retains the existentialist insight on the free, self-constitutive nature of human experience without violating the hermeneutical claim that concrete historical interpretation must take the place of abstract analysis. My interpretation displaces the ontological analytic which reifies a non-existent mode of being into a kind of politics and, with it, its emphasis on the extraordinary beginnings of action. Experiences now cannot be understood without a view of the context which they take up and to which they are directed. Accordingly, interpretation and not the analytical structure of beginnings is the task facing political thought.

The argument unfolded here has certainly moved beyond Arendt's explicit wish to keep thinking apart from action in order to liberate the latter from the (traditionalist) grip of the former. Yet, I believe I have only rearticulated Arendt's thinking within the Arendtian universe. Her understanding of thinking means that we are never withdrawn from the world, even when we are not engaged actively, visibly, in the public realm. Crucial to my reading, the "flying spark of fire" to which thinking tends, is immanent to the very movement in the world which she describes as politics. The non-appearing measures are common to specific kinds of things in the world – recall Arendt's house example, non-appearing to the eyes or the imagination but presupposed in the notion of "housing" or "dwelling" (Arendt, 1971: 430–1) – thus making movement in the world possible. They can be explicated in terms of our experience as beings of the world because they emerge as we talk about or respond to the things of the world.

It seems to me that the resulting call to understand political experiences is not equivalent to making one's peace with what is given as existentialist readings fear. In the broad strokes sketched here, hermeneutics or the experience of understanding moves boldly beyond the evident; it seeks the transparency of historical materials by meditatively moving through them. Arendt's radiant talk of the materials is not incidental: they shed a "natural light" which "illuminates its own past" she says (Arendt, 1994: 319). Reconstituting this light has no *a priori* limit in the distance the movement of understanding can travel.

In this gesture towards the radical similarity between understanding and philosophizing lies the answer to the objection that hermeneutics domesticates Arendt (Villa, 1996: 3). We need not elide her effort to free action

from external demands; if we did, we risk reducing her to a sophisticated story-teller or a theorist of narrative; Arendt is of course all of these things, but insofar as she thought through human experience she remains a philosopher.

Endnotes

- 1 Despite changes in terminology, this distinction is not new (Fuss, 1979; Benhabib, 1996: 125; Biskowski, 1995).
- 2 Villa (1992; 1996), Honig (1993) and Curtis (1999) on one hand, and Habermas (1977; 1983), Disch (1994) and Benhabib (1996) on the other are representative examples.
- 3 Although meaning is everywhere present – the term itself is mentioned 95 times – it is not addressed at length in any part of the work.

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