

Disclosure and Responsibility in Arendt's *The Human Condition*

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt is one of the few philosophers to examine the dynamics of political action at length. Intriguingly, she emphasises the disclosure of *who the actor is* as a specific distinction of political action. This emphasis is connected with some long-standing worries about Arendt's account that centre on its apparent unconcern for political responsibility. In this paper I argue that Arendt's emphasis on disclosure actually harbours a profound concern with responsibility. I do so by examining three questions. The main part of the paper focuses on how disclosure is bound up with political actors' attempts to act with one another. It asks: what would it be for an actor to evade disclosure? And: what is involved in an actor acknowledging the fact of disclosure? – Looking at the matter negatively, attempts to evade disclosure and its implications lead to irresponsibility. Positively, for the actor to accept disclosure is to see herself as bound to her fellow actors and audience by relations of joint action and mutual accountability. The conclusion asks a third question: what would it mean for on-lookers to deny the relevance of actors' disclosure? I argue that Arendt's historiography – which revolves around stories in which political actors reveal who they are – reflects her conviction that people can and must take responsibility for their world.

Keywords

Arendt, responsibility, disclosure, action, violence, exemplarity, story-telling

Disclosure and Responsibility in Arendt's *The Human Condition*¹

Several worries about Arendt's account of political action – above all, as expressed in her most extended theoretical treatment, *The Human Condition* – revolve around the topic of responsibility. Alongside long-standing concerns about her dismissal of 'social' concerns from politics, critics such as George Kateb, Seyla Benhabib and Hanna Pitkin have worried about her disavowal of means-end thinking, her reluctance to specify moral criteria for political judgment, and her emphasis on the disclosure of the actor.² In various ways, these aspects of Arendt's thought seem to cut against the obvious thought that responsible political actors should strive to achieve morally valuable ends. As Mary Dietz puts it, 'without a substantive purpose, Arendt's courageous political performer is constantly in danger of becoming only an actor, "concerned merely with the 'impression' he makes".'³ Related worries recur in simmering suspicions about the 'agonism' or 'aestheticism' or 'decisionism' of Arendtian politics, its irrelevance to 'normal' as opposed to 'extraordinary' politics, and her apparent celebration of ancient Greek politics, for all their elitism, violence and instability.⁴

In this paper, I would like to address directly Arendt's focus on disclosure and the worries about responsibility that it has generated. Of course, Arendt's emphasis on disclosure has attracted persuasive defences, such as that of Jacques Taminiaux.⁵ And no reader of Arendt's more overtly political texts can doubt that she was deeply concerned with problems of acting responsibly, just as her judgments of concrete instances of political irresponsibility pull no punches. Situating Arendt's account of action alongside these texts and her broader political concerns is an important interpretative move, pursued by such distinguished authors as Margaret Canovan and Seyla Benhabib;⁶ and a similar move can be made as regards Arendt's specific concern with the disclosure of individual persons, which, as David Marshall documents, originated in her reaction to 'the homogenizing tendencies of modernity.'⁷

Nonetheless, despite many persuasive readings and valuable contextualisations of *The Human Condition*'s account of action, I believe that commentators have not yet found a

satisfactory way of relating its focus on disclosure to political responsibility. One might conclude, perhaps, that these aspects of action sit in irresolvable tension.⁸ Certainly Arendt takes pains to stress the ‘frustrations’ of action, not least those posed by the unpredictable consequences of the actor’s self-disclosure as she interacts with others. But it would be more satisfying, I suggest, if we could show an integral connection between the actor’s self-disclosure and the responsibility for the world which, Arendt says, ‘arises out of action.’⁹ At any rate, to demonstrate such a connection is the task that I undertake in this paper.

Beginning with the perspective of the actor herself, I first ask: What would it be for a political actor to *refuse disclosure* of her identity, or to try and make this disclosure *irrelevant*? The central thought I pursue is this: When someone attempts to evade disclosure or its implications, this inevitably has the effect of denying shared responsibility for political affairs, and thus leads to characteristic forms of irresponsibility. I then pose a second question: What is involved in the actor’s *acknowledging and accepting* the fact of disclosure? I suggest such acknowledgement lends us important clues about the spirit and principles of responsible political action. An actor who is prepared to appear before others relies on their judgments and hopes for their support, thus upholding the principle of shared responsibility for the world. I conclude by posing a third question: What would it mean, *to deny that it matters* that actors disclose themselves in the course of action? As part of her emphasis on disclosure, Arendt tells us that the ‘most original’ product of action is not the realisation of a particular goal or end, but rather a *story*. This may suggest an undue concern with the viewpoint and satisfactions of historical spectators. I offer an alternative way of looking at this claim, in order to underline the basic connection between disclosure and responsibility in Arendt’s thought.

The process of disclosure and attempts to evade its ‘unreckonability’

Arendt claims that the disclosure of actors necessarily occurs in the process of action.¹⁰ A person does not have or disclose a unique identity because he embodies some peculiar, non-repeated assemblage of qualities that we might simply enumerate. In Arendt’s terms, that would be to mistake the ‘what’ for the ‘who.’¹¹ Nor does such a unique identity exist within the self, already there awaiting disclosure: in our inner lives,

Arendt sees multiplicity rather than identity – in Dana Villa’s words, ‘a self whose lack of appearance deprives it of both unity and reality.’¹² Rather, a person has a unique identity because he is born into¹³ the human web of relationships in a unique place, and then charts – and suffers – a unique course through it, precisely by relating to others who relate to him in their turn. That is, a person’s identity is partly constituted by those relations and the (inter)actions by which he stakes his place in the world: ‘If there were no shared world [*Mitwelt*]... the person would be lacking.’¹⁴ Whether we think of private or public life, to say who someone is requires us to tell the story of his interactions and relations with others. And political action is always a matter of interaction: the meeting and crossing of different opinions and initiatives that precisely concern a ‘shared world.’¹⁵

Arendt also emphasises that the concomitant disclosure of identities often makes action immensely frustrating: ‘the disclosure of the person inheres in all, even the most goal-oriented, actions and has for the course of action decisive consequences that are predetermined neither by motives nor by goals.’¹⁶ The frustration arises because we do not know whom others will perceive when we act. While some reactions may be more or less predictable, or quickly emerge in the course of action, no actor can ever be sure what others have made or will make of her. Hence this process of on-going, mutual disclosure introduces an equivocal and unreckonable element into action. Insofar as we can truly say who someone is, this is by telling a story once the person’s life is complete¹⁷: a thread that is already fully woven into the web of human relationships, one that has uniquely affected every other life-thread that it has touched.¹⁸

Despite these frustrations, Arendt insists: ‘Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character... It is then indeed no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object.’¹⁹ She also suggests that some political actors welcome the disclosure of an identity that they themselves will never know – no reader can ignore her discussion of the ancient Greek understanding of action, with its ‘urge toward self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors.’²⁰ For the most part, however, she admits that the disclosure of identities seems ‘of secondary importance,’ since action generally concerns ‘a demonstrable and worldly given.’²¹ Above all, she underlines how the unpredictable consequences of an unknowable disclosure frustrate

the actor who wishes to achieve a particular goal or, perhaps, control the identity that others attribute to him.

As a first step in demonstrating how disclosure is related to responsibility, I want to consider the forms of irresponsibility that emerge when actors try to evade this frustration. In the remainder of this section, I will consider how action goes awry when actors try to control this disclosure. In the next section, I consider attempts to prevent its having unpredictable consequences.

Arendt is clear that ‘no purpose in the world can have this identity freely at its disposal,’²² that ‘no human being can “shape” his life or create his life-story.’²³ In *The Human Condition*, she mentions one way in which actors may try to escape this fact. Elsewhere, she considers two, rather more revealing ways: the attempt to convince the world of an image of oneself, and the attempt to live out a story already lived.

The case mentioned in *The Human Condition* is Achilles’. To underline the unknowability of one’s identity, Arendt likens it to the Greek *daimon*, ‘looking over [someone’s] shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.’²⁴ But she suggests that a person may – exceptionally – succeed in the aim of bequeathing a particular identity by choosing ‘a short life and a premature death,’ thus withdrawing from the ‘consequences and continuation of what he began’ and foregoing ‘the continuity of living in which we disclose ourselves piecemeal.’²⁵ As *Vita Activa* puts it, ‘it is as if [Achilles] had dared to look over his own shoulder and set eyes on his *daimon*, and what he saw was courage personified.’²⁶ Perhaps needless to add, his was an example of martial, rather than political, action and courage: in politics to choose premature death implies some form of martyrdom, which is meaningful only if one’s name is genuinely identified with a political cause or principle.

Regarding more everyday cases of actors preoccupied with the identity they project, we may recall an observation of Mary McCarthy’s from Arendt’s notebooks: ‘those who seek to project an “image” are unaware of how they look. The truth they are revealing has become invisible to them.’²⁷ As soon as we ‘see through’ an actor’s preoccupation with his image, he looks quite different to us – a play-actor rather than an actor. *The*

Origins of Totalitarianism gives a case in point: Disraeli's naïve yet calculated projection of greatness and Jewish exoticism, in the cause less of political than social achievement. 'He played the game of politics like an actor in a theatrical performance, except that he played his part so well that he was convinced by his own make-believe... This charlatan... acted the part of the Great Man with genuine naiveté and an overwhelming display of fantastic tricks and entertaining artistry.'²⁸ Clearly this dual image of exoticism and greatness played with some success among his contemporaries (it garnered much suspicion, too). But however variously Disraeli's story has subsequently been told, play-acting and irresponsibility are essential elements within it. The attempt to project an image, an abiding preoccupation with what others perceive, trips over itself. What it finally discloses is a merely instrumental attitude toward whatever worldly affairs the actor may interfere in – in short, vanity and irresponsibility.

Following Arendt's claim that identities are revealed in stories, an actor who tries to control who he discloses might pursue a third route: attempting to play a part already played before. To pretend to be an actor in a story whose end one already 'knows' and where each actor has his allotted part is one theme of *On Revolution*. It is, as Arendt bitingly puts it, how the men of the Russian revolution became the fools of history. After the French example, they knew that the revolution must end by eating its children, and played out their roles accordingly. Their folly was to act as 'good revolutionaries' by reenacting a known history: 'It was the course of events, not the men of the [French] Revolution, which they imitated.'²⁹ Our identities are indeed revealed in stories; but to encourage events to conform to some previous story is worlds away from the spirit of the original. It is bound to make for a new story – perhaps 'farce' rather than 'tragedy' in Marx's famous words³⁰ – and disclose quite different persons. Its irresponsibility is also clear: one no longer responds to persons and situations actually encountered, but instead to a preconceived narrative.

The attempt to evade the consequences of disclosure by denying relatedness

Arendt stresses the predicament of the actor who does not know who she discloses and hence cannot know what her audience will or should make of her. Let me turn, now, to another sort of irresponsible response to this frustration: not the endeavour to control

the identity we disclose, but rather the attempt to prevent this disclosure having consequences of its own. In doing this, Arendt contends that we will inevitably be led to substitute making for acting. That is, we fall into an irresponsible attempt to realise a preconceived end-product or state of affairs – to which the opposite is not pure performance or mere disclosure (as some critics, such as those I cited in my introduction, have worried), but rather acting with others in order to uphold or alter the terms on which we live together.³¹

The basic reason for this stems from the fact that, in politics, we can only act in relation to others. Action is always a matter of relating, relating always involves appearing, and appearing is disclosing – no matter how concrete our intentions and goals. As such, there can be only one way to make the disclosure of my identity irrelevant to what I bring about: to make *relationships* irrelevant. *The Human Condition* tells us that ‘action can result in an end product only on condition that its own authentic, non-tangible, and always utterly fragile meaning is destroyed.’ That is rather vague, and *Vita Activa* clarifies. Action can do this ‘only when one is prepared to renounce what it can give rise to of itself – the objectively non-specifiable, non-tangible and always utterly fragile relationships between human beings.’³²

But what would it be to ‘renounce’ relationships and still be effective in the realm of human affairs? To make relationships irrelevant would be to set aside our entire apparatus of agreement, persuasion and joint action. This apparatus rests on our being connected by mutual commitments and common interests, by on-going responsiveness and answerability to others (thus the words ‘responsibility’ or, in German, ‘*Verantwortung*’), by a shared sense of what we regard as important or desirable, by each party’s sense of whom she is dealing with and what relationships she stands in to them – in a word, by shared terms and common interests that permit on-going interaction and meaningful initiatives for change.

Arendt gives an illuminating example of avoiding relatedness in *Origins*, in discussing the imperialists’ secretive rule by decree. Whether vain and of overweening ambition, like Cecil Rhodes, or retiring and relatively moderate like Lord Cromer, the imperialists came to embrace secrecy and bureaucracy, underwritten by overwhelming superiority in

the means of violence. This constituted a radical form of separation from ‘their’ subjects:

Aloofness became the new attitude of all members of the British services; it was a more dangerous form of governing than despotism and arbitrariness because it did not even tolerate that last link between the despot and his subjects, which is formed by bribery and gifts... Integrity and aloofness were symbols for an absolute division of interests to the point where they are not even permitted to conflict... [They no longer] live in the same world... share the same goals, fight each other for possession of the same things...³³

As Arendt also comments, this separation was ‘the result of a responsibility that no man can bear for his fellow-man and no people for another people.’³⁴ In other words, the refusal of relatedness and disclosure was bound up with the attempt to determine others’ fate from outside and on high. Cowed by force and debarred from all access to their rulers, the ‘subject peoples’ were denied any responsibility for their world.

Obviously this is an extreme and historically specific example. A more limited and pretty much ubiquitous form consists in attempts to ‘pull the strings’ from ‘behind the scenes’ that politics has known since time immemorial.³⁵ However well-intentioned and even indispensable such measures may occasionally be, the dangers of such refusals to ‘show one’s hand’ – in Arendt’s terms, to appear and disclose oneself – are so familiar as to hardly need stating: mutual suspicion, incomprehension, and unaccountability. Matters are not much better for the actor, since she puts herself at risk of exposure and a concomitant loss of credibility and personal authority – hence the idea of ‘plausible deniability,’ so useful to those who would exercise powers without taking responsibility for their use.

In *Vita Activa*, Arendt writes that the political actor who seeks to make an end-product will try to ensure that he and his followers ‘are no longer related in any moment of action.’³⁶ He tries to change the world without relying on human relationships, because these would inevitably act back on and disrupt whatever end he had originally conceived. People who have no relations with us can have no reason to alter their conduct in line with our opinions, except insofar as things boil down to ‘the old carrot-

and-stick approach.³⁷ If bribery and manipulation imply some bare minimum of relations, then violence stands out as the paradigm mode of action that eschews disclosure.³⁸

Apart from all moral reservations, irresponsibility arises here in the form of a systematic mistake about the enterprise one is engaged in. The attempt to overcome the frustrations of relating and disclosing by making relationships irrelevant can never fully succeed. This is because the effective wielding of violence still relies on joint action in the form of a power base – usually, as Arendt reminds us in ‘On Violence,’ an army or police force.³⁹ Hence Arendt’s repeated insistence that those who make rulership possible do not merely obey, they *support*. They empower the ruler and effectively act with her; ruler and supporters remain very much ‘related in action.’ Inevitably, then, the actor never fully evades the frustrations that arise from the fact that others have their own wills and opinions, which are affected by their responses to *her*, that is, to the identity she discloses in a way that necessarily exceeds her grasp. Nonetheless, by organised violence and domination it is possible to limit action to an ever-smaller group and render others more or less powerless. This is the irresponsibility of depriving those persons of possible responsibility for their fates and, by the same token, rejecting any accountability to them. In other words, it is a denial that politics involves taking *shared responsibility* for the world.

Disclosure as a clue to the nature of responsible action

I have pointed to some ways in which political actors might seek to evade the frustrations bound up with self-disclosure – either by attempting to project a pre-conceived identity, or by attempting to change the world while remaining unrelated to others. In both cases, this is bound up with forms of irresponsibility. The actor who is determined to preserve an image or live out a story has put self before world; the tyrant or imperialist attempts to impose a fate upon others and refuses any responsibility to them, just as the manipulator does on a much smaller scale.

What I would like to consider, now, is how the fact that relating always involves disclosing can provide us with some positive clues to the nature of political responsibility. It will not tell us much about *the goals* that responsible political actors

should pursue. Except at the broadest level – for example, in her concern for lasting institutions that grant people civic status and ‘house’ political action⁴⁰ – Arendt regards these as a matter for political debate and not for philosophical legislation. Indeed, she treats philosophical prescriptions as positively dangerous, insofar as they tend to float free from the questions of practical judgment that face political actors who – whatever their opinions as to how the world should be – must act within a pre-existing and no doubt ‘non-ideal’ constellation.⁴¹ In other words, Arendt’s perspective – unlike that of more prescriptive political theorists – is bound to the problems of assuming responsibility for the world, here and now.⁴² To assume such responsibility does not, of course, mean accepting the world as it is; but it does mean accepting that it is *this* world that must be altered or conserved, and so *here* one must start. As Arendt puts it,

every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with the deeds of the ancestors. Whoever takes upon himself political responsibility will always come to the point where he says with Hamlet: “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!”⁴³

My contention is that Arendt’s concern with the position of those actors – and in particular, the fact that they disclose themselves in acting with others – can help us appreciate how ‘responsibility for the world... arises out of action.’⁴⁴ Put simply, to acknowledge the fact of disclosure is to “stand up and be counted”: without abandoning the attempt to change others’ minds, to prevail over other opinions, and to change the world, the actor remains bound to his audience and fellow actors – and hence to the world that they share, preserve and change through their interaction.⁴⁵

Let me begin with the following note from Arendt’s *Denktagebuch*:

Every actor wishes that people will follow him. The deed is always also an example. Political thought and judgment is exemplary (Kant), because acting is. Responsibility means, in its essence: to know that one sets an example, that others will “follow”; in this way one changes the world.⁴⁶

There is a familiar refrain in the Arendt literature, largely based on her Kant lectures, that exemplars are crucial to the judgment of the political and historical *spectator* (just as they were to Arendt's writings).⁴⁷ One thing already interesting about this note is its concern with the judgment of the actor: the political actor is asked to appreciate that she 'sets an example.'⁴⁸ Moreover, this is the essence of responsibility.

But what might it mean to 'know one sets an example,' that others might "follow"? As we have seen, no actor can know just *what* example she sets: what, or rather *who*, that is will be judged and told by others. But this does not mean that how one appears is irrelevant to the actor. Acknowledging that an actor concerned *only* with her image must finally appear as a play-actor, it is still quite reasonable to wonder: Just what should we make of a political actor who were *not* concerned with how she appears to others?

In the first place, Arendt highlights a self-reflective dimension to the responsible actor's concern for appearances. In her notebooks, she points to the moral and political importance of imagining how one's deed will appear:

Don't do unto others what you don't want to be done to yourself. It is an appeal to the imagination: Imagine before doing to others that your doing would be done by others to yourself. *Id est*: Objectify – look at it from the outside with reference to you. / One could also say, perhaps with greater justification: Before doing imagine how it will look to you after you've done it.⁴⁹

Or recall the maxim that Arendt approvingly attributes to Machiavelli, "Appear as you may wish to be."⁵⁰ This refers the actor both to others' possible perceptions and to actual examples of conduct: 'When I make such a decision [as in "Appear as you wish to be"]... I am making an act of deliberate choice among the various potentialities of conduct with which the world has presented me.'⁵¹ Our imagination takes its bearings both from others' perspectives and from previous examples that we wish to emulate or excel in some way.⁵²

Second, and less subjectively: An actor who were unconcerned with her appearance before others would show an unjustified confidence in herself, and by implication a

mistrust of her interactors and audience. If they are not deemed fit to offer judgments that might alter the actor's own, then how can they be fit to act as partners and deliberators, fit to "follow" in any sense beyond the mere following of orders? In her famous interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt says: 'this venture [into the public realm] is only possible where there is trust in people. A trust – which is difficult to formulate but fundamental – in what is human in all people. Otherwise such a venture could not be made.'⁵³ Although these words do not correspond to anything she says in *The Human Condition*,⁵⁴ I believe they express one of the anchor-points of all her thinking about action and appearance. Without giving up the intention to act on one's own account, we must trust others' ability to judge whether our example counts as good company⁵⁵ or a cautionary tale, and to decide whether they will act in concert with us, whether they will "follow" or not. As Leslie Paul Thiele has argued, this means that Arendtian action has the character of an *invitation*.⁵⁶ To put the point rather paradoxically, in conditions of non-domination, a stance of trust and solicitation is forced upon every actor, at least to some degree. However much she may try to evade this, by cunning or even ruthlessness in the games of power, each actor remains dependent on others' more or less willing cooperation. To take account of their actual and imagined judgments is to accept the basic conditions of action in concert, and of shared responsibility for political affairs.

This leads to a third point. Willing appearance before others and concern for their judgments are elementary conditions of responsibility. They bind together the forward-looking sense involved in acting so as to *take responsibility* for the world with the backward-looking sense of accepting that one will be *judged responsible* for one's deeds. On the one hand, the actor steps into the public realm in order to *take a stand* on matters that can only be addressed with others and that are relevant to many others. On the other, a person can only answer for her deeds to the extent that her conduct is not hidden but seen by others, and is acknowledged as owing to her own initiative, rather than mere submission to authority or inevitability. (As Roy Tsao notes, Arendt was only too aware how the excuses of many collaborators in political evil – 'I was only following orders,' 'Anyone else would have done the same'... – constitute denials or evasions of agency.⁵⁷) A person has reason to answer for her deeds insofar as she sees them as contributions to a world shared with others, who thereby have a valid stake in

what she does and – as the actor must hope – reason to judge her favourably and support her initiatives.

To ‘know that one sets an example’ does not, then, require one to know what example one sets, though it surely demands imagination and judgment of prior examples. Rather, it demands recognition that one will indeed be judged by others, as an actor in one’s own right. By virtue of not knowing whom one discloses, the actor is *beholden* to others – who, seeing the world from their distinct perspectives, may act and respond on their own accounts. As Steve Buckler puts it, ‘it is in the nature of that very desire [for public approbation or glory], that... people must acknowledge and subject themselves to the judgment of a community of spectators [who may also be actors], of which they too are members.’⁵⁸ Subjectively, there may be a great deal of immodesty in the pursuit of political power and reputation. Objectively, like all ventures that depend on an audience’s consent, it involves a counter-intuitive humility and on-going accountability.

Conclusion: telling stories about action

Arendt places the revelatory potential of human action and relationships at the centre of her thinking. One reason for this is already apparent from her treatment of totalitarianism. Twentieth century political events and ideologies made devastatingly clear that to think of human beings as ‘more or less successful repetition[s] of the same’ is to render millions upon millions of people ‘superfluous.’⁵⁹ From this perspective, it does not help much to insist on the familiar theme that each person is an end-in-herself. Because this concept omits the absolute *Einmaligkeit* (uniqueness, literally ‘one-time-ness’) of each person, it cannot answer the nihilistic question: why one more or less person in the world? For Arendt, each person’s novelty and uniqueness is made manifest as she charts a course through the web of human relationships. *Origins of Totalitarianism* insists on the fundamental prescription that follows from this, that each person be accorded the right ‘to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions.’⁶⁰ As I have emphasised, this implies a corresponding imperative: to act in the acknowledgement that a story may be told of one – and judged by others.

Arendt’s emphasis on disclosure in political action corresponds to the special urgency that this imperative holds in the public realm – where we no longer move in relatively

confined circles of family or social life or workplace; where we directly encounter a world made up of many others, each acting and responding on the basis of how things and persons appear to him or her; and, above all, where we experience the possibility of changing, renewing, and taking responsibility for the world we share.⁶¹ Such responsibility depends, as I have tried to show, on the awareness that one can only do this in concert with others. To acknowledge the fact of disclosure is to accept that one acts on one's own account in a story whose end one does not know; that it is for others to judge what example one sets, whether one's cause is worthy and whether one serves it well; and that political outcomes be determined, not by cloak or dagger, but by our willing and witting responses to one another's initiatives. Arendt's self-disclosing political actor is bound to the very conditions of joint action: responsiveness to a world shared with others, relationships with fellow actors, and reliance on their responses to her actions and herself.

To conclude, I would like to point out how intimately this relates to Arendt's view of history. Like her account of action, this courts the suspicion of irresponsibility; nonetheless, it has human responsibility at its core. Arendt's historiography emphasises story-telling, which can seem like an aesthetic preference that neglects more objective factors.⁶² Having asked what it might mean for an actor to deny or evade her self-disclosure in the course of action, however, we might also ask a parallel, historical question: What would it mean to deny that it matters, that people have disclosed themselves in the course of actions and events? – There seem to be two, not altogether unfamiliar lines of thought that might involve such a denial. One is the belief that all that matters is what has been achieved or bequeathed. Alternatively, we might deny that identities matter, in the belief that history is not made by individual human beings anyhow.

The first position claims that, not actors or actions, but events and end-products are what remain salient: political actors are, if you like, mere means to whatever they leave behind. A basic problem with this line of thought is that no political achievement ever lasts *unless* people continue to act so as to uphold it: a law, a constitution, a parliament, any other political reality – all endure only insofar as people act in their terms. As Arendt expresses the point in 'What is Freedom?':

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Political institutions, no matter how well or badly designed, depend for continued existence upon acting men... Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action.⁶³

No doubt, acts of foundation differ from those of conservation or augmentation.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, to focus only on some 'achievement' is to treat the very essence of political life as merely incidental. To leave action and actors out of account is to ignore how any political outcome can be secured and upheld.

The second position denies even more baldly that human beings are able to take responsibility for their world. Despite 'the impossibility of ever making an individual responsible for what results [from action],'⁶⁵ Arendt refuses to 'despair of all possible human responsibility'⁶⁶ and view history as the product of *anonymous* forces and processes, rather than of human action and initiative. To insist that human beings reveal themselves in the course of action or (equivalently) that action always has authors, and to insist that this revelation matters or (equivalently) that the actor bears a specific dignity that exceeds whatever effects or achievements he leaves behind, may seem like an aesthetic predilection or comforting delusion – as if Arendt merely 'preferred' stories of human initiative to those of complex social, economic and other processes that actually determine people's fates.⁶⁷

In the first place, Arendt certainly does not deny that those processes are real and must be understood and acknowledged: their terrifying force is a theme of *The Human Condition* as much as *Origins of Totalitarianism*. More than this, however, I think we should understand her approach as a call to responsibility. Arendt's fundamental conviction is that unless people act together – above all, to found, augment and renew lasting political institutions – human power ceases to reach into the future, so that people are left helpless in the face of social and economic processes and whatever political movements may gain sway by merely cleaving to them. Whether political actors aim to conserve or change their situation, they always inherit a starting point which is the condition of all they do and which they can deny only at the cost of wishful thinking – yet another form of irresponsibility.⁶⁸ In these conditions, no political actor ever achieves exactly what she sets out to achieve, nor does any group, however

concerted their action. What they may do, though – and what each attempts to do, in standing up before others for her idea of how the world should be – is take some responsibility for the world and resist the ‘ruin’⁶⁹ (as Arendt says, courting the suspicion of poetry rather than prose) that such processes and forces must spell.

Historical forces – not to mention our sheer mortality – do indeed spell ruin, for the simple reason that no political achievement remains alive without further initiatives to uphold and renew it. Hence our understanding of how we can take shared responsibility for anything politically worthwhile always depends on our telling and retelling of stories of action in the world, both as cautions and exemplars.⁷⁰ Far from being ‘peripheral side-effects,’ these stories really are, as Arendt says, ‘the most original product of action.’⁷¹ As such, and as so much political speech testifies, stories can be highly potent in politics – no less so, sadly, when they are distorted by wish or fear or resentment, or by ideological and theoretical preconceptions. Arendt draws both political and theoretical lessons from this power. Politically, *Origins of Totalitarianism* gathers many cautionary tales of failures to take responsibility; *On Revolution* tells stories of action in concert while lamenting subsequent failures to remember and (thus) to understand and renew. Theoretically, *The Human Condition* elevates action and the narratives that preserve it to a central place within political philosophy, facing down the perennial philosophical temptation to focus upon ideals and asking instead how we can take responsibility for the world – and *who it is* who does so.

Reprising his earlier concerns about Arendt’s account, George Kateb has recently argued that for Arendt, ‘morality often ends up either subordinate in importance to existential values or sidelined by them... The[se] existential values [are]... human status and human stature. Human dignity for Arendt rests on human uniqueness, the human difference from the rest of nature.’⁷² But splitting the ‘existential’ off from the ‘moral’ is misleading: people disclose their uniqueness and stature in many activities; politics has a *moral* claim to the first rank of those activities, because it is here that people deliberately attempt to take responsibility for how things go in a world of shared institutions and entwined fates – a prerogative that indeed separates human beings ‘from the rest of nature.’⁷³ Hence stories of how they do this have a unique importance. In a few glorious cases we may recall stories of action in the hope of repeating the actors’

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achievements or keeping them alive, or revivifying a defeated cause that we believe should have been victorious. In many others, we may judge actors to have been mistaken or even quixotic in their efforts. But even in such cases – at least insofar as they avoid the extremes of irresponsibility that cut people off from their fellow actors and a shared world – action still discloses a doer and her will to responsibility, and thereby exhibits a dignity of its own.

Endnotes

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- ¹ For repeated citations of Arendt's works I use the following abbreviations:

BPF: *Between Past and Future*, enlarged edition. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

CR: *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

DT: *Denktagebuch*, eds. Ursula Ludz & Ingeborg Nordmann. Munich: Piper, 2002.

EJ: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

EU: *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

EUH: *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* [1955]. Munich: Piper, 1986.

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

LKPP: *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

LM: *The Life of the Mind, Volume I: Thinking*, ed. Mary McCarthy. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

MDT: *Men in Dark Times*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970.

OR: *On Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

OT: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973.

RJ: *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken, 2003.

VA: *Vita Activa*. Munich: Piper, 1967.

- ² George Kateb (1984) *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*. Oxford: Martin Robertson. Seyla Benhabib (1996) *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage. Hanna Pitkin (1981) 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public,' *Political Theory* 9: 327–352.
- ³ Mary Dietz (1994) "'The Slow Boring of Hard Boards": Methodical Thinking and the Work of Politics,' *American Political Science Review* 88: 873-86, p. 880 (quoting Max Weber).
- ⁴ For some further reference points on these charges, see: Jürgen Habermas (1977) 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power,' *Social Research* 44: 2-24; Martin Jay (1978) 'The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt,' in his (1986) *Permanent Exiles*. New York: Columbia University Press; Margaret Canovan (1978) 'The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought,' *Political Theory* 6: 5–26, esp. pp. 21f.; George Kateb (1999) 'The Judgment of Arendt,' *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53: 133-154; Dana Villa (1992) 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action,' *Political Theory* 20: 274-308, and Bonnie Honig's response (1993) to Villa in *Political Theory* 21: 528-533; Andreas Kalyvas (2004) 'From the Act to the Decision: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism,' *Political Theory* 32: 320-346. Roy Tsao convincingly rebuts well-worn charges of Grecophilia in (2002) 'Arendt against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*,' *Political Theory* 30: 97–123.
- ⁵ (1997) *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger*, pp. 79-87. Albany NY: State University of New York Press.
- ⁶ Margaret Canovan (1992) *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Seyla Benhabib, 'Hannah Arendt's Political Engagements' in Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz & Thomas Keenan (eds) (2010) *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*. New York: Fordham University Press. Also: Jeffrey C. Isaac (1993) 'Situating Hannah Arendt on Action and Politics,' *Political Theory* 21: 534–540.
- ⁷ David L Marshall (2010) 'The Polis and Its Analogues in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,' *Modern Intellectual History* 7: 123–149, quoting p. 131.
- ⁸ And not without textual grounds: *HC220* memorably refers to 'the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents' (cf *VA279*).
- ⁹ *VA316* [not *HC246*]. I will often quote *VA*, since Arendt made many revisions to the German version of *HC*, giving my own translation and citing the comparable English page as 'not *HC*.'
- ¹⁰ Or more accurately, action always discloses *unless* 'human togetherness is lost, that is, where people are only for or against other people' (*HC180*) – so that genuine differences of opinion are disqualified or joint action is simply impossible. In that case, deliberate and laborious effort is needed to make the doer appear – for example, by bringing her to court (cf *EJ289*, *RJ148*).
- ¹¹ *HC181*.

- ¹² (1996) *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, p. 90. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- ¹³ And not ‘thrown’: *VA226* [not *HC184*] makes Arendt’s disagreement with Heidegger explicit; cf *DT549* [August 1955].
- ¹⁴ *VA310f* [not *HC243*]. In other words, and as the quote from Villa also hints, there is an ontological dimension to this disclosure: since we are appearing beings, attempts to separate being and appearance represent a denial of our own nature (cf *HC176*).
- ¹⁵ As Villa (n. 12, pp. 92ff) points out, this means that action discloses a world, as well as doers.
- ¹⁶ *VA226* [not *HC183*].
- ¹⁷ Since no one planned the story, there are only historians, not an author (*HC186*). And a history never fully succeeds in saying who someone is: ‘the being-so-and-not-otherwise [*das So-und-nicht-anders-Sein*] of the acting person’ (*VA233*) is most nearly revealed in the (stage) actor’s imitation or mimesis (*HC187*).
- ¹⁸ These formulations are added at *VA226* [cf *HC184*]; see also the expansions of *HC192* at *VA240*. The element of entanglement, and how this is transformed by action’s engagement, are well emphasised by Annabel Herzog (2004) ‘Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Responsibility,’ *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 10: 39–52.
- ¹⁹ *HC180*; cf *VA221*.
- ²⁰ *HC194*.
- ²¹ *VA224* [not *HC182*].
- ²² *VA219* – more emphatic than *HC179*.
- ²³ *VA227* – again clearer than *HC184*.
- ²⁴ *HC179*.
- ²⁵ *HC193f*.
- ²⁶ *VA243*.
- ²⁷ *DT666* [April 1967].
- ²⁸ *OT68*, 72.
- ²⁹ *OR57f*: in part thanks to Marx, ‘so much more interested in history than in politics,’ they had learned ‘history and not action’ (*OR61*, 58). At a personal level, this was also the lesson Isak

Dinesen had to learn before she became a story-teller of genius. See ‘Isak Dinesen: 1885-1963’ on ‘the “sin” of making a story come true, of interfering with life according to a preconceived pattern’ (MDT106). This example, along with some of Arendt’s other biographies, are well discussed by Allen Speight (2011) ‘Arendt on Narrative Theory and Practice,’ *College Literature* 38: 115–130. On Arendt’s telling of Eichmann’s story, see also Jakob Norberg (2013) ‘The Banality of Narrative: Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,’ *Textual Practice* [early online version].

³⁰ At the very beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

³¹ See my discussion of Arendt’s critique of instrumental thinking in politics, focussed on the passage from ‘What is Freedom?’ that I quote in conclusion below: (2012) ‘The Power of the People,’ Hannah Arendt Centre “Quote” of the Week, at <http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=5083> (last accessed 15 July 2013).

³² HC196; VA246.

³³ OT212. Cf HC52: ‘the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time,’ and further HC182f.

³⁴ OT207.

³⁵ OT also gives the example of Lawrence of Arabia. Arendt writes that ‘every commonplace idea gets one chance in at least one individual to attain what used to be called historical greatness’ (68). In Lawrence, ‘the experiment of secret politics’ (OT218), a passion for anonymity and to move with the forces of history, attained this. *EUH* expands on OT to underline this aspect: ‘What he attempted and finally succeeded in was to get free of his own life – that is, the life that was marked out, apparently inescapably, for him by his innate personality in a world given with birth’ (*EUH*465). As Arendt says, such stories usually end in ‘the vulgar duplicity of the spy’ (OT218); it was Lawrence’s fundamental decency, ‘quixotic chivalry’ (OT218) and determination not ‘to become a self’ (*EUH*467) that lent him greatness – notwithstanding his own entirely consistent rejection of this notion.

³⁶ VA236 [not HC189f]; cf RJ47.

³⁷ CR8. The fateful illusion that everyone is rationally compelled to agree on the self-same end may paper over this point in theory – but it has always, as Arendt stresses, been defeated by the reality of human plurality.

³⁸ Cf Carolin Emcke’s discussion of an anonymous terrorist murder: (2010) ‘On Terror: Mute Force – Reflections on the Red Army Faction’ at www.carolin-emcke.de/en/article/96.on-terror-mute-force-reflections-on-the-red-army-faction.html, last accessed 15 July 2013.

³⁹ CR149.

- ⁴⁰ Jeremy Waldron [2000] 'Arendt's Constitutional Politics,' in Garrath Williams (ed) (2006) *Hannah Arendt: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers*. London: Routledge. Rosalyn Diprose (2008) 'Arendt and Nietzsche on Responsibility and Futurity,' *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34: 617–642.
- ⁴¹ This point is well developed by Steve Buckler (2007) 'Political Theory and Political Ethics in the Work of Hannah Arendt,' *Contemporary Political Theory* 6: 461–483 (esp. pp. 475ff) and 'Ethics and the Vocation of Politics,' in Anna Yeatman, Charles Barbour, Magdalena Zolkos & Phillip Hansen (eds) (2011) *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt*. New York: Continuum.
- ⁴² 'Politics like charity begins at home,' as Arendt wrote in a letter to HJ Benedict [25 November 1967], published as (2009) 'Revolution, Violence, and Power: A Correspondence,' *Constellations* 16: 302–306, p. 305. For recent responses to this problem, see: Amartya Sen (2009) *The Idea of Justice*. London: Allen Lane; Iris Marion Young (2011) *Responsibility for Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press; and the 'political realist' response to Rawlsian theorising discussed by William A Galston (2010) 'Realism in Political Theory,' *European Journal of Political Theory* 9: 385–411, as well as other papers in the same issue.
- ⁴³ *RJ27f*, cf *CR149f*, *157f*, *BPF192*; *EJ298*. As these references indicate, Arendt was much concerned with the taking of responsibility: thus Iris Marion Young's 'partial critique' – that Arendt's notion of 'political responsibility [is] just as backward-looking as guilt' – misses the mark ('Guilt versus Responsibility: A Reading and Partial Critique of Hannah Arendt,' in Young (n. 42), p. 92).
- ⁴⁴ *VA316* [not *HC246*].
- ⁴⁵ Compare Peg Birmingham's argument that Arendt sees 'immortality' as a central issue for politics – not in order to glorify heroic individuality, but rather because 'the foundation of political communities... lies in the drive for immortality; without the desire for a common, enduring world, politics is impossible' – (2011) 'Arendt and Hobbes: Glory, Sacrificial Violence, and the Political Imagination,' *Research in Phenomenology* 41: 1–22, p. 18; likewise (2006) *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*, pp. 125f. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press. Cf *DT539f*.
- ⁴⁶ *DT644* [January 1966], my translation.
- ⁴⁷ For a recent critique of this view, see David L Marshall (2010) 'The Origin and Character of Hannah Arendt's Theory of Judgment,' *Political Theory* 38: 367–393, as well as Arendt's own contention that a spectator also sits inside every actor: *LKPP63*.
- ⁴⁸ '...we wish to set an example, that is, to persuade others to be pleased with what pleases us,' as Arendt puts it at *LM36*.

- ⁴⁹ DT682 [April 1968], original in English.
- ⁵⁰ See OR101 (following DT521 [March 1955]), although Arendt rejects the implicit assumption that there is some ‘being’ behind the appearances.
- ⁵¹ LM37.
- ⁵² Clearly there are connections here to Arendt’s account of judgment on the part of spectators. Lisa J Disch’s exploration of Arendt’s idea of ‘train[ing] one’s imagination to go visiting’ (LKPP43) is especially helpful on its importance to this sort of judgment: (1994) *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, ch. 5. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, as is Bryan Garsten (2007) ‘The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment,’ *Social Research* 74: 1071–1108 on the link between subjectivity and responsibility in judgment. See also Linda Zerilli (2005) “‘We Feel Our Freedom’: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,’ *Political Theory* 33: 158–188, esp. pp174ff) and Leslie Thiele’s valuable rejoinder, (2005) ‘Judging Hannah Arendt: A Reply to Zerilli,’ *Political Theory* 33: 706–714. Here, however, I focus on *actors’* capacities for responsible judgment as they relate to questions of disclosure. Kimberley Curtis explores some connections between ‘going visiting’ and political responsibility in (1999) *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics*, ch. 5. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- ⁵³ EU23; cf MDT77.
- ⁵⁴ But cf HC204, 310.
- ⁵⁵ On the importance of the actual and imagined company we keep, see RJ110f, 125, 145f.
- ⁵⁶ Thiele (2009) ‘The Ontology of Action: Arendt and the Role of Narrative,’ *Theory & Event* 12. Villa (n. 12, p. 107) makes a parallel point about the relation between actor and spectators.
- ⁵⁷ Tsao (n. 4); see especially his closing discussion (p. 119) of Eichmann, the quintessential evil-doer who presented himself as a mere means in the service of others’ ends.
- ⁵⁸ Buckler (2007, n. 41), p. 477.
- ⁵⁹ DT17 [August 1950]; cf HC8.
- ⁶⁰ OT296.
- ⁶¹ See OR252f.
- ⁶² Here I lump together some rather different lines of criticism – apart from many charges concerning Arendt’s historical (in)accuracy, see Judith Shklar (1977) ‘Rethinking the Past,’ *Social Research* 44: 80–90 alongside her more disparaging (1983) ‘Hannah Arendt as Pariah,’ *Partisan Review* 50: 64–77 (on Arendt as ‘monumental’ historian), and George Kateb (n. 4) and (2007) ‘Existential Values

in Arendt's Treatment of Evil and Morality,' *Social Research* 74: 811–854 (whose position I discuss below).

⁶³ BPF153.

⁶⁴ We can read *On Revolution* as a sustained argument that we must remember the spirit of the founding acts in order to keep the initial 'achievement' alive.

⁶⁵ VA279 – clearer than HC220.

⁶⁶ OT220.

⁶⁷ Here I pursue just one line of defense of Arendt's story-telling, focusing on disclosure and responsibility. Other writers have ably defended Arendt's emphasis in terms of disclosing the experiences and perspectives of those involved, thus allowing a proper appreciation of the human significance of events and their relevance for those who come after (*inter alia* Disch (n. 52), chs. 4 & 5, and Seyla Benhabib (1990) 'Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative,' *Social Research* 57: 167–196), or in terms of preparing a shared, critical memory of past wrongs in order to address those and prevent their recurrence (María Pía Lara (2007) *Narrating Evil: A Postmetaphysical Theory of Reflective Judgment*. New York: Columbia University Press).

⁶⁸ As Arendt comments of such imperialist legends as Kipling's stories of dragon-slayers and 'boyhood noblesse': 'Only in the frankly invented tale about events did man consent to assume his responsibility for them, to consider past events *his* past' (OT211, 208). For another reading of this claim, and wider reflections on the role of narrative in responsibility, see Graham MacPhee (2011) 'Escape from Responsibility: Ideology and Storytelling in Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*,' *College Literature* 38: 176–201.

⁶⁹ HC246. See also Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (2011) 'Hannah Arendt: Reflections on Ruin,' *New Formations* 71: 110–124.

⁷⁰ This point is well emphasised by Thiele (n. 52). On the wider role of exemplary institutions and ideas in politics, see also Alessandro Ferrara (2008) *The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁷¹ VA226 [not HC184]; cf HC173.

⁷² Kateb (2007, n. 62), p. 811.

⁷³ Cf HC198f: 'the space of appearance... where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.'