

# Chapter One

## Action and Human Existence

### THE CONTOURS OF ACTION

In this chapter the focus of our attention will be upon the conception of political action which Arendt elaborates in her 1958 work, *The Human Condition*.<sup>1</sup> In this text, which constitutes the epicenter of Arendt's oeuvre, Arendt's interest reaches to both sides of the action-ideal, but her concern for political action as a mode of self-realization is foremost.<sup>2</sup> How this emphasis colors her conception will become clear as we proceed.

By way of preface, however, it is important to underscore that Arendt believes that political action has all but disappeared in the modern age, and where it still appears she believes it goes unrecognized or is misunderstood. In *The Human Condition* Arendt endeavors to correct this deficiency of understanding and strives to make her readers cognizant of the existential loss that the withering of the human capacity for action entails. By such means she hopes to kindle in her readers such appreciation for this capacity that they will be inspired to body it forth into the political realm.

But if Arendt is to achieve these ends she must first elucidate the nature of political action, and, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt pursues this objective by several stratagems. Her first is to map action's spatial coordinates by means of the distinction between the public realm and the private realm. At length, and with barely concealed normative intent, Arendt recovers the original Greek conception of this dichotomy and their high estimation of the public realm as the site of immortality-bestowing political action. In addition, Arendt employs the Greek conception to measure the shortcomings of the present age.

Arendt's second stratagem is to highlight the specificity of political action by contrasting it with labor and work, the two other components of the *vita activa*. To this end, Arendt elaborates phenomenological descriptions of each of these activities and does so in a manner which makes quite clear why she holds action to be the noblest of the three. Also, as part of her critique of the modern age, she tells the story of how action, which once held pride of place within the *vita activa*, fell from this position to be replaced first by work and more recently by labor. Arendt of course would like to see action restored to its prior prominence, and it is with this purpose in mind that Arendt's analysis is framed.

Our particular goal in this chapter will be to examine Arendt's baseline conceptions of political action and of political community as these are set forth in *The Human Condition*. But our angle of approach will differ from that which close fidelity to the surface contours of *The Human Condition* would suggest because our aim is to elucidate what lies below, and accounts for, the rather unusual topography of the surface. And thus, while the stratagems that Arendt herself employed in setting forth her conception of action will be canvassed in some detail, this will only be done after the deeper logic of her account has been excavated.

But why, the reader may ask, need we seek to penetrate to the depths at all? What aspect of Arendt's own formulation is so problematic as to justify such "strategic" indirection? What is it, moreover, about the topography of the surface that is so "unusual" as to warrant such an approach?

To answer these questions, and to set the stage for the detailed analysis that is to follow, the general contours of the conceptions of action and polity that Arendt develops in *The Human Condition* ought to be considered:

At the center of the ideal polity envisioned by Arendt stands the public space where citizen and fellow citizen join together in action and are bound together by a concern for the common weal.<sup>3</sup> Institutionally, her ideal seems fairly akin to the New England town meetings of old. Conceptually, it is participatory democracy. Practically, it is face-to-face politics.

Political action is the main thing: it is for the sake of stepping forth from the darkness of the private into the light of the public that Arendt's ideal citizens live.<sup>4</sup> To act on behalf of, in common with, or before one's fellow citizens is held to constitute the consummation of an individual's existence. Through the word or deed spoken or done in full public view, the citizen is described as breaking free from obscurity and as actualizing his potentiality for public personhood. Moreover, as Arendt repeatedly underscores, such a citizen is well-placed to earn a great and lasting name should he act in a manner that commands the attention and affection of fellow citizens. Renown today creates the chance of renown tomorrow; and love of renown is regarded by Arendt as a worthy and authentic motive for political participation.<sup>5</sup> But more important to her than renown is individuation: by Arendt's measure, political action is more capable of making human plurality actual than is any other element of the *vita activa*; and, as one might infer from her analysis of totalitarianism's preconditions, this facet of action is accounted by her to be of great significance.

Surely, much that has been adumbrated in the preceding overview merits greater attention, but it is nonetheless arguable that nothing mentioned so far cries out for the discernment of some hidden architectonic principle that might bring order to a formulation whose inner logic hardly seems obscure. Indeed, if Arendt was nary more than a neo-civic-republican (albeit one of the first and most outspoken of the postwar period) or a garden-variety champion of participatory democracy, then there might be little reason to provide more than a descriptive account of her conception. What then is there to suggest that anything more is required?

Unconsidered thus far has been Arendt's conception of the specific content of the citizen's concern. We know the citizen to be public-spirited; and we know him to be bent upon attaining that kind of immortal fame which polities make available to those who perform great acts of service on behalf of the commonweal. But we do not know what kinds of issues in particular will elicit his advocacy or antipathy. Nor do we know what kinds of issues will properly be placed upon the public agenda. Of course, if Arendt merely passed over this matter in silence, it would hardly be appropriate to call attention to it. Indeed, one might have fairly assumed Arendt's indifference to the question and that no particular kinds of issues were ipso facto prohibited from receiving public consideration.

In fact, Arendt is far from silent on this point, and there is little doubt that many of her readers have found her comments regarding the range of issues that she would exclude from politics, as inherently antipolitical, to be most disturbing. For example, explicitly excluded by Arendt are economic questions—including the questions of the redistribution of

wealth, of industrial relations, and of workplace democracy and discrimination. More generally, she calls into question the legitimacy of most of the issues that animate the politics of the modern state when she rails against the corruption of the public space by questions of what she calls "national housekeeping," which she depicts as entailing private, and thus antipolitical, concerns. In addition, she enunciates principles for determining the question of impermissible content that indicate to many that she would oppose as antipolitical whatever steps a polity might take to combat social discrimination against the members of social minorities. And if the exclusion of many issues is disturbing for its utter inexplicability, as disturbing is Arendt's seeming failure to articulate a clear criterion of inclusion. That much which one might assume to be the natural content of politics is rejected is apparent, but when so much has been purged, the question of what content remains becomes quite pressing. Yet regarding this matter, Arendt gives little guidance.

It is, then, Arendt's peculiar and heterodox conception of the issues that are legitimately topics of political debate that first signals the need to probe beneath the surface of the account she provides. Unless we do so, the rationale for exclusion will remain enigmatic, for on the textual surface these topical exclusions appear to be mere occasional and contingent utterances devoid of the theoretical necessity that only a subsurface, and structural, account can provide. Moreover, if we would endorse Arendt's conception of participatory democracy, then we must take seriously her reasons for (in effect) rejecting social democracy as incompatible with it. And if it is felt that she would have us divide what ought to be kept together, then it is necessary for us to discern and address the rationale that leads Arendt to posit their incompatibility.

As will become clear in the analysis to be unfolded in this chapter, Arendt's definition of certain issues as antipolitical, and her recommendation that these issues be excluded from political consideration, follows from theoretically prior formulations and valuations that reach to the heart of Arendt's political thought. Particularly entailed are her conceptions of freedom and individuation, and of their opposites. Also entailed are Arendt's conception of the public space and her conception of the temporally transcendent nature of the objects and concerns that are fit to appear within it. Only after close scrutiny of these concepts and of their interrelations will we be in a position to assess the validity of Arendt's case for the antipolitical nature of so many of the issues that constitute the substance of modern politics.

It must be stressed, however, that our mode of proceeding in this chapter owes only in part to our concern for "the content problem." Determinative to a far greater degree is our overarching objective of eluci-

dating Arendt's conception of action, and the conviction that an exploration of the conceptual substrate that underlies it will produce the clearest comprehension of this conception and of the criteria of meaning and value which are entailed by it.

## THE POLARITIES OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

As a general rule Arendt theorizes by dichotomizing. Almost always the concepts come on board the ark of theory in pairs. It is never freedom alone, but freedom *and* necessity. It is never the public alone, but the public *and* the private. The first term is defined by comparison and contrast with the second. Always the interrelations between the two are emphasized. Thus it becomes incumbent upon us to frame our analysis of the conceptual underpinnings of Arendt's conception of action with an eye to Arendt's own mode of conceptualization.

A moment ago I noted that the "content problem" pointed to a cluster of concepts which reach to the heart of Arendt's conception of action. In this section we will press our inquiry into the latter by focusing upon: the conceptual dichotomies that underlie it, the relations that exist between these pairs, and the relations that exist between these pairs and the various facets of Arendt's conception of action. Our focus upon these matters will also indicate why Arendt believes that a rejuvenated politics can raise humanity from its fallen condition.

As already noted, Arendt's conception of action is intimately related to her conceptions of freedom and individuation, and to her conceptions of temporal transcendence and of the public realm. And by inference we now know that the opposites of each of these conceptions are entailed as well. Accordingly we shall focus our attention upon the emergent dichotomies which underlie Arendt's conceptualization of the politically relevant aspects of the human condition, namely, freedom and necessity, uniqueness and uniformity, lasting and passing, and public and private.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, through our examination of these dyads we will uncover the foundations of a very particular vision of the human telos and of the vital role played by political action in enabling man to achieve it. Arendt's vision of political community as a community of actors will be considered as well.

From the outset, the reader ought to note that though these dichotomies constitute the essential underpinning of her thought, Arendt pays only scant and scattered attention to their origins in human experience.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, as I present the dichotomies I shall seek to provide a better account of their origin than that which Arendt herself provides.

That she fails to account explicitly for the existential origin of her chief concepts and fails as well to argue for their adequacy is a significant shortcoming of her work that in the view of many severely undercuts the persuasive power of her analysis. By failing in this respect she leaves it to her readers to decide for or against her analysis on the basis of its intuitive appeal. To those for whom her analytic lacks such immediacy, she offers little by way of argument on its behalf.

Nonetheless, this arrogance of tone—for it is arrogance to present a set of new basal categories on a take it or leave it basis—while it may account for the distinctly mixed reception Arendt's work has received, cannot be reason to dismiss her analysis. That she fails to provide her reader with grounds does not make her arguments groundless. Indeed, the cogency of her basic analytic framework is such that it behooves her sympathetic critic to provide such an account of her categories as will explain why Arendt held them to constitute the fundamental ground for thinking about man and politics. As such an account, the following is in part interpretive, in part speculative, yet always hews as close as possible to Arendt's own account while seeking to be more expansive where she is terse and more systematic where she is epigrammatic.

### *Uniqueness and Uniformity*

Our aim is to understand Arendt's conception of action and her reasons for holding action in such high esteem. In large measure the key to both follows from her conception of action as a medium which facilitates the actualization of human plurality or uniqueness.

At the conceptual level, this concern for the unique in man, and for the sites conducive to its manifestation, informs Arendt's analytic vision which, in consequence, discriminates assiduously between the unique and the uniform, between that which is particular to the individual and that which is common to the species. Traits, talents, virtues, as well as the activities and spaces where these become manifest are all brought under the scrutiny of this standpoint. At the level of value, man's project of achieving complete individuation translates into Arendt's valuation of all individuating factors, spheres, and spaces over those which render men similar.

Arendt most often treats human plurality as a datum, as something which is simply part of the human condition and, as such, need not be accounted for. On occasion, however, Arendt traces this datum to what she discerns as its roots in human natality.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, following Augustine, she describes birth as the entry into life of a singular and unrepeatable (and hence unique) individual.<sup>9</sup> What birth thus begins, Arendt

depicts action as bringing to fruition, with action becoming a kind of second birth whereby the singular and unrepeatable individual enters into the world to manifest who he alone is.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently, though birth essentially individuates, it fails to do so existentially. Thus the uniqueness which Arendt depicts as an inalienable concomitant of birth is in fact a potentiality in need of existential actualization. Action and, more particularly, political action, are held by Arendt to constitute the *sine qua non* through which this actualization of inborn potential is to occur.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, then, as Arendt also maintains, one who is deprived of the opportunity to act is deprived of the opportunity to achieve this, and is thereby prevented from fulfilling a central aspect of the human telos.

What makes action so important is the fact that the essential uniqueness of each person, which action is said to make manifest, is opposed by forces which are quite capable of stymieing its manifestation, forces which Arendt characterizes as the biological and social aspects of human sameness.<sup>12</sup> The biological phenomena that attest to human sameness are quite familiar: death, in particular, is the great equalizer. All persons die, none can escape it. As measured against it, all differences between persons seem to pale. Moreover, as members of the same species our desires, needs, and life paths are necessarily similar. Sickness, suffering, pain, pleasure, hunger, love, and death are common to us all. As members of a given society, moreover, even our taste, opinions, and aspirations display that high degree of uniformity which Martin Heidegger so aptly characterized as the mentality of *das Man*, or the "they."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, be the elements arrayed against uniqueness ever so powerful, action is held by Arendt to be more powerful still and capable of triumphing over these individuality denying forces.<sup>14</sup>

Action is also singled out by Arendt for its capacity to facilitate the self's transcendence of those forces of role and functional differentiation that are the inevitable concomitants of social rationalization.<sup>15</sup> But for the kind of action which reveals a self that is both unitary and unique, Arendt believes that we would be imprisoned within forms of behavior that are completely subordinated to various social wholes and, as such, are quite contrary to the manifestation of the self's specific identity.

Thus, regarding the family, Arendt would argue that the possibilities of full self-display within it are eclipsed by the role-contingent norms that inevitably shape both behavior and perception as we take on the roles of husbands or wives, of fathers or mothers, or of sons or daughters—and behave, perceive, and are perceived according to our respective positions within the social whole of the family. Similarly, Arendt depicts the workplace as being analogously structured in accordance with the functional

differentiation of employer and employee, and in accordance with the norms inherent in the shop floor division of labor.<sup>16</sup> Nor, in Arendt's account, is this subordination of self to role and norm diminished in the broader sphere of civil society which she regards as being even more conformist and less tolerant of individual difference.<sup>17</sup>

The problem for the self that would manifest itself as a unitary and unique personality can thus be described as a problem of both inward fragmentation and outward dispersion. Outwardly, the self wears as many masks as it has roles and functions, while inwardly its sense of identity is correspondingly fractured. If, as Arendt claims, the self comes to know itself in accordance with the ways in which it is known by others (that is, intersubjectively), then the self will come to know itself as an amalgam of masks devoid of a coherent center.<sup>18</sup> How, then, is this outward dispersion and inward fragmentation to be overcome? As one would expect—almost as a matter of definition—the answer is action, for action reveals the unitary and unique self that transcends the forces of biological and sociological uniformity.<sup>19</sup> And yet the question arises of where, and how, action can achieve this if all social interactions are overdetermined by role-playing and functionally rationalized behaviors. In response, Arendt would doubtless observe that there is one realm that is not thus overdetermined, namely, the political realm, and that it is in this realm of appearance that revelatory action finds its true home.<sup>20</sup>

By now the reader will have noticed that Arendt relies to some degree upon Heidegger's account of authenticity and its nemeses. It must be emphasized, however, that Arendt's analysis of natality distinguishes her account of human difference from that of Heidegger and other existentialists. For Heidegger, of course, it is the awareness that arises out of the individual's confrontation with the fact of his mortality that existentially differentiates him in all of his ultimate aloneness from the rest of humankind.<sup>21</sup> For Arendt, however, the authenticity thus obtained remains both essentially and existentially rooted not in mortality but in natality, for, as it is the latter that originally sends forth each person as unique, it is also the latter that makes possible the action, and more particularly the political action, which Arendt regards as the privileged vehicle of authentic self-disclosure. Mortality, as we shall see, figures in Arendt's account as that which impels men to achieve a preternatural lastingness; but it is the fact of their specific and unique natality that enables men to act in a way that stamps the individual's actions as unmistakably his own and unlike anybody else's.<sup>22</sup> The mere recoil from mortality cannot account for this.

At one level, the difference may seem to be a matter of taste: we are born alone and we die alone and in the course of our lives each of us



comes to grasp these twinned facts. Whether a theorist chooses to emphasize the one factor more than the other hardly seems to be decisive or significant. From an existentialist standpoint the consequences seem to be the same: start from the one point or the other and one arrives at the reality of human individuation and uniqueness. At most there might be a difference of tone.

From another perspective, however, the difference becomes more significant. At issue is whether, at the most profound level, the differentiation of self from self is an originary or a derivative characteristic. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, it is arguably the latter, dependent first upon existential awakening and then upon the individual's stance as it develops in light of an encounter with his ownmost possibility.<sup>23</sup> Not Being but the individual wills the differentiation. From this perspective, then, all persons arguably are essentially "the same."

For Arendt, however, while a confrontation with death as one's ownmost possibility may cause one to become aware of one's unique destiny, the differentiation of self from self is primordial and marks every individual from the moment of birth as the possessor of a unique telos which may or may not be achieved in the course of his lifetime.<sup>24</sup> This difference is significant.

Once again following Heidegger, Arendt also maintains that entities—and human entities among them—are revealed through appearance; they emerge from darkness into light in order to manifest their essence before darkness covers them again.<sup>25</sup> But appearance presupposes a viewer.<sup>26</sup> Thus he who would disclose his unique self through action does not merely act; rather, he acts with and before other persons who are similarly intent upon making an appearance.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, in Arendt's view, who a man is in his singularity cannot be known, not even by the man himself, except to the degree he attains concrete particularity as a man among men through interaction with them.<sup>28</sup> Action, in other words, implies interaction, mutual revelation of mutual becoming, and mutual acknowledgment.<sup>29</sup> In short, action implies community.

Only in community, then, can men achieve the manifestation of who they are. Yet, as has been intimated already, not every gathering of persons is such a community as might facilitate this process of comanifestation. Modern society, for example, is not such a community, not on account of its size, but because of the behavioral conformity and uniformity which hold sway within it.<sup>30</sup> But it also fails to be such a community because within it almost all interactions are private in the sense of being one-on-one exchanges. Or, to frame the matter somewhat differently, in society one never appears before the whole community; rather one

appears serially, before one person—and hence in one relational role—at a time.

By Arendt's definition, the community that enables those who belong to it to manifest their individuality through their interaction with one another is the political community. Indeed, politicality and the manifestation of plurality are synonymous for Arendt.<sup>31</sup> But what particularly facilitates this self-display is the fact that within the public space where the community gathers to discuss the affairs of the day, each citizen appears and speaks before all the rest who in turn bestow upon him the trans-subjective identity that corresponds with, and thus objectifies, his unique and unitary selfhood.<sup>32</sup> Thus by entering a properly constituted public space the citizen is able to overcome the limitations that inhere within that universe of interactions which are private, serial, or functional. Exactly how a community needs to be organized to achieve the aim of true politicality shall become clearer further on.

In theory, then, the public space allows the men who enter it to be known in all their specificity by virtue of the exposure they receive there. It would be a mistake to imagine, however, that the actor who stands before his peers is like some object that can be known all at once. In reality, this self-revelatory process unfolds in time and what the citizen reveals is a self that is always in the process of formation and manifestation.<sup>33</sup> It is a self that is revealed as a life, or more particularly, it is a self that is revealed *in* a life to the degree that it is a public life. It is not, however, a self that is merely unfolded before the spectators who record its self-related and self-determined contours. More than this it is a self that is shaped through its interactions with fellow actors and spectators.<sup>34</sup> Because the actions initiated by the others who inhabit the field of self-revelation are not to be known in advance, the nature and direction of the self's development, which is always responsive even when not reactive, cannot be known in advance either.<sup>35</sup> Thus Arendt's oft-repeated dicta that no man can be truly known until he has departed from the stage.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that Arendt celebrates the contingency which characterizes the realm of public action and interaction.<sup>37</sup> The actor, she observes, acts into a web of other actors who act and react as well.<sup>38</sup> The actor is not sovereign because those with whom he interacts are equally capable of action. The unpredictability of the first actor is matched by the unpredictability of the rest. Each in his spontaneity and uniqueness is capable of doing the unexpected and in doing so begins series of actions and reactions all along the web whose consequences are such as none can predict. Because men are free they can react and act in novel fashion, and the outcome of action, because it is always interaction, is forever in doubt.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that in taking this view Arendt goes too far sometimes, as if recoiling from an overextreme sense of life's radical contingency. That she tends to underestimate the degree to which, in normal periods, the consequences of action are foreseeable might be attributed to her having come to maturity during an epoch of instability and disintegration. Whatever the reason, the result is an overly radical formulation. The kernel of Arendt's insight, however, is sound. Absolute responsibility for consequences could be legitimately assigned only if the consequences of action are wholly predictable. But if, as Arendt suggests, the purchase price of such predictability entails the sacrifice of human freedom and plurality, then, surely the price is too high.

Thus one can see why Arendt feels it is necessary to shift our emphasis from the question of what is accomplished by some action to who is revealed by it as the crucial measure of value.<sup>40</sup> To esteem or disesteem the actor for the consequences of his action strikes her as wholly inappropriate for seldom is any particular outcome wholly attributable to one man's action. If the actor were to be judged by the consequences of his action which are such as wholly escape the actor/initiator, he would be wrongly praised or blamed for a result of which he was not the author.<sup>41</sup> Unless one aims to replace action with making and thus true politics with rule, such are the limits on the direct efficaciousness of action that Arendt says we must accept.<sup>42</sup>

In Arendt's estimation, then, sovereignty and plurality are forever at odds.<sup>43</sup> Man is free, but he is not sovereign. If he were granted sovereignty, plurality would be ruined, that is, one man's sovereignty would violate the plurality of the rest.<sup>44</sup>

But this loss of control is, by Arendt's measure, more than adequately compensated by what he receives in turn. It is man's lack of sovereignty and the consequent fact that he is an actor among actors that renders action heroic.<sup>45</sup> The actor, as we have seen, is not the author of events but at most their initiator. Once he has acted, a process that is boundless, unpredictable, and irreversible is set in motion.<sup>46</sup> He feels responsible for what he has begun, yet cannot see it through to the conclusion he desires. He acts and then suffers as the spectacle wrought by his hands goes away.<sup>47</sup> However, if he is a man of courage and inmost nobility, he will not flee the field and retreat to the safe haven of obscurity, but will for the sake of his destiny push on, doing what he can and suffering what he must.<sup>48</sup>

Over the course of a lifetime spent in the public sphere every man is disclosed as a story of deeds done, words spoken, adversities suffered, and character revealed—a story that is authored by none and enacted, as it is interacted, in common with one's peers. If it be a record of achievement it

owes much to the others by whose action it was carried through, but even if it is not, it is necessarily the story of a life and the record of how one man met—or failed to meet—the challenges of circumstance. Was he principled? Was he courageous? Was he an opportunist? In adversity was he strong or plaintive? Did he bare his back to bear the burdens of the hour, or did he shun the responsibilities which life places upon us all? Such questions of character are, in Arendt's view, the measure of man. But the answer, if it is going to reveal the individual's specific identity, must take the form of a story.<sup>49</sup>

### *Lasting and Passing*

Our aim is to understand Arendt's conception of action and her reasons for holding action in such high esteem. As detailed in the previous section, in large measure, the key to both follows from the dichotomy of uniqueness and uniformity. As we have observed, in order that the latter may be overcome and the former manifest, Arendt conceives of action as that which gives birth to the public lives and stories through which human plurality is disclosed. But this is only one aspect of the account. In this section we turn our attention to a different aspect, namely, to the one which emanates from Arendt's reflections upon the political significance of mortality.

At the origin of Greek civilization Arendt discerns a recurrent existential motif from which arose the Greek obsession with temporal transcendence. The pivotal experience is that in which the individual authentically confronts the fact of his own mortality. Out of this confrontation there arises, dialectically, a Promethean will to persist in being, to overcome the futility of a fleeting existence, to become immortal somehow in some way.<sup>50</sup> Every age, if not every man, must grapple with this problem.<sup>51</sup> Arendt explains that for the early Greeks this dream of immortality was embodied in the immortality of the gods and in the hope that the doer of great deeds might attain to immortal fame.<sup>52</sup> For the early philosophers, by contrast, this hope was embodied in the notion that contemplation of the eternal eternalizes the soul of the one who contemplates.<sup>53</sup> Of these two paths, the former was clearly the one that led to the public square, a space that Arendt describes as one of "organized remembrance," a space that increases the chances that the doer of marvels could live on through collective memory.<sup>54</sup>

For the Christians, as Arendt—following Machiavelli and Rousseau—observes, the problems of mortality are cast in an altogether different light. Immortality is assured, only its tenor is in question. The political impetus is undercut.<sup>55</sup> In the current age, neither the hope of salvation nor

the quest for personal immortality seems capable of motivating the mass of men. The impetus to greatness in word and deed is undermined in an age of mass anonymity in which instant, evanescent, top of the pop chart fame ("known by all today, remembered by none tomorrow") is all that is attainable. In the age of ideology, only the historical process is held to be immortal; at most, one might hope to play a small part in this ongoing process, at least touching and being touched by the everlasting, even though unable to achieve immortal fame thereby.<sup>56</sup>

On the basis of this insight into the cultural significance of the existential response to the problem of mortality, Arendt constructs one of her pivotal analytical distinctions. At a conceptual level, the experience of one's mortality vis à vis the durability of other things is used by Arendt to make her readers sensitive to the fact that the cosmos is composed of entities of varying duration; one becomes attentive, in other words, to the temporality of things.<sup>57</sup> At the level of value, the desire to persist in being is translated by her into the valuation of that which persists over that which evanesces all too quickly.<sup>58</sup> Between the lasting and the passing, she holds the lasting to be superior.

As a rule, Arendt heaps laurels upon the Greek conception while she is most critical of the modern responses to this existential concern; but it must be acknowledged that even the Greek political response has its limitations. We moderns are in a position to see just how short-lived immortal fame can be and thus cannot help but see its pursuit as vain and illusory. But one should not infer from this that the modern mind will find itself unalterably opposed to every conception that enables man to transcend his mortal condition. For example, it is clear that one component of man's desire for immortality is a desire for a life of significance to others. Man experiences dread before the prospect that his life will not have mattered, that he will have lived and died without his life having made a difference in the course of things. In order to overcome this dread man needs to establish a connection between himself and something that shall outlast his brief life. The desire for personal immortality is negated, raised, and preserved in the movement by which a man comes to see his own immortality as inherent in the potential immortality of that for the sake of which he ventures his own finite existence in action and advocacy.<sup>59</sup>

Admittedly, then, he hopes in vain who hopes to achieve immortal fame through the greatness of his words and deeds. At the same time, though the shortness of historical memory be not kind in this regard, Arendt in effect proposes that there is no greater spur to greatness than the desire to be deserving of this acclaim. Where, after all, will he who reasonably foresees no chance of being remembered ten minutes after he

breathes his last—and gives not a care for the esteem in which he is held by posterity—find the inner resources to dare to be great?

Leaving aside, then, the question of whether the immortal fame craved by men is really attainable, Arendt asks instead what sort of man would be deserving of this honor if indeed it were bestowable at all. In reply, Arendt declares that the standard by which to measure such a man must be greatness: only that which is great is deserving of long remembrance. But what is meant by greatness?<sup>60</sup> Along what path ought man seek to exceed the commonplace? By what criterion are we to measure him: greatness of soul? of achievement? of consequence?

Arendt gives little direct guidance here. Indeed her references to greatness as the criterion of action are most enigmatic.<sup>61</sup> If the great and the long to be remembered are the same then one could as easily aim at being remembered for the greatness of one's criminality as for the greatness of one's virtue. Could Arendt mean to embrace such an amoral standard of action?<sup>62</sup> One point that counts against such a notion is the emphasis she places upon acclaim. He who would be accounted as great is said to seek acclaim—which is hardly equivalent to notoriety.<sup>63</sup> The question, however, still remains: what does Arendt mean by greatness, if she does not merely mean whatever is acclaimed in any particular time and place?

What Arendt means by greatness of action she never states in a direct manner. Luckily, however, she discusses greatness in the realm of aesthetics—which is suggestive of how we might understand it in this context. Thus in what follows we will seek to determine what Arendt means by greatness of men and of action by means of an interpretation based upon her discussion of greatness in art.<sup>64</sup>

As something which deserves to be saved from perishing, the humanly great can be likened to the work of art, and the greatness which makes a (man/deed) fit for long recollection can be likened to the beauty which makes an artwork worthy of long preservation. Such is the tack suggested by what Arendt has to say in *The Human Condition*, as well as by her discussion of art in *Between Past and Future*.<sup>65</sup>

As Arendt correctly observes, art objects are distinct from other objects in being taken from the realm of use in order to be preserved in perpetuity.<sup>66</sup> They are set aside because we find them to possess a beauty that far exceeds the commonplace and find their beauty to be such as we would like to see shine forever unto all generations. All other objects are judged primarily for their utility or function, as is appropriate to objects produced with such ends in mind. At the same time, these everyday objects share a vital aspect of their being in common with those objects produced as art objects: as objects they appear as objects, and though usu-

ally not designed with an eye to their appearance, they "cannot help being either beautiful, ugly, or something in between" for this quality of all objects is an inescapable concomitant of their appearing at all.<sup>67</sup> "Everything that is must appear and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is nothing which does not in some way transcend its functional use and its transcendence, its beauty, or ugliness is identical with appearing publicly and being seen."<sup>68</sup> And the world is tacitly aware of this fact, judging every object that appears within it, not only the art objects, for its "adequacy . . . to what it should look like" according to prevailing canons of aesthetic taste, criteria which have little to do with "mere usefulness."<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, the words and deeds, spoken and done, in pursuit of this or that worldly object or end, point in the direction of a dimension which transcends that which can be measured by the criteria of utility and consequence. Like all things in the world which, by virtue of possessing shapes, constitute appearances and are, as such, fittingly viewed from an aesthetic standpoint, so too do the actions of men, no matter what their worldly purpose, constitute symbolizations of character which are fittingly assessed for the magnitude of excellence, virtue, or beauty that they manifest.<sup>70</sup> As there are implicitly aesthetic norms governing our sense of what all objects should look like, so do we possess implicitly performative norms governing our sense of how men should appear. As it is pleasing to behold what exceeds the commonplace in the direction of great beauty, so too is it pleasing to behold what exceeds the commonplace in the direction of great virtue and bespeaks the presence of a superior person.<sup>71</sup>

That all objects appear does not make them all beautiful; that in all they do men reveal their characters does not make all characters pleasing to behold. The usual practice in matters of display, as Arendt would acknowledge, is to give less attention to that dimension of things that goes beyond use and function. It is in the nature of man to produce things that are more useful than beautiful and to comport himself more in accordance with the lowest standards of conduct than with the highest. Man in his activities of labor, work, and action may be so taken with his mundane ends as to overlook entirely the nonpurposive dimensions signified by a concern for beauty or excellence. But such a man, in Arendt's view, is not so free as he might be. If in all he did he kept one eye upon the ideal of beauty or upon the excellence he should strive to embody, his actions would be correspondingly uplifted into a realm of beauty and freedom.<sup>72</sup>

Helping to clarify this conception is Arendt's treatment of action in "What is Freedom?" an essay in which action is considered in terms of motives, goals, and principles.<sup>73</sup> To be sure, she notes, every deed or proposal has its motives and goals. Irrespective of whether one's endeavor be

public or private, these it will surely have. Yet beyond these Arendt discerns a third element, necessarily present though varying in its degree of explicitness, namely the principle by which the act is inspired, and which in turn the act makes manifest in the world.

In the same way as the appearance of a thing or deed was said to transcend its mundane purpose or function, Arendt speaks of the principle of an action transcending the motives and goals which necessarily attend it as well. Also, analogously, it may be said that as all things appear and hence are potentially assessable for their beauty or ugliness, so too do all actions embody principles which may be thematized and assessed for their excellence and fittingness. In the principle—that is, in the principle that is immanent to a particular act—Arendt finds that which constitutes the specific ground of whatever meaning and whatever greatness a particular act contains.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, in Arendt's parlance, with regard to any given action, it may be said that the principle defines the idea, or the universal, "for the sake of [which]" an action is undertaken, as distinguished from the situation-specific "in order to" that pertains to the goal.

This distinction between "for the sake of" and "in order to" is crucial for Arendt inasmuch as it helps her to differentiate between the essence of an act and what an act accomplishes, and, by inference, to differentiate between "who" a man is and what he does. The former, or the dimension of character, is signified—albeit abstractly—by the principles that are manifest in any given deed as instances of virtue or of vice, whereas the latter pertains to an actor's ends and the question of whether he achieves them.<sup>75</sup> Obviously, the principles of action will be implicit in the actor's choice of ends as well, yet the import of Arendt's conception is to call attention to the performative manifestation of principle that occurs in *the way* ends are pursued. Thus she would insist that we clearly differentiate between the two, and that our assessment of action and actor give due consideration to both. Hence an action, or an actor, is not to be held "just" solely because justice is its, or his, end. Rather, it is more important for our assessment of either to know, irrespective of the end, whether it is pursued justly, that is, in a just fashion. Justly done, then, would be acts done "for the sake of justice"; and acts thus done are done as a "just" person does them. Honorably done, by contrast, would be acts done "for the sake of honor"; and acts thus done are done as an honorable person does them. According to this conception, then, an actor could not act unjustly for the sake of justice though he might act unjustly "in order to" gain justice for himself or for another. In the latter case, the fact that he was willing to act unjustly says much about the nature of the deed and the doer. The character of the actor and his action, in other words, are to be



read from the manner of the action more than from “what” it accomplishes—because it is the manner that truly expresses the action’s principle.

Moreover, Arendt argues that it is the principle which imparts to an act its human significance, and timeless relevancy.<sup>76</sup> By contrast to the motives and goals which are exhausted in the realization of some end, Arendt declares that “the principle loses nothing in strength or validity through execution.”<sup>77</sup> Confirming this notion is the fact that as the time, and hence the distance, between ourselves and a particular event increases, the event’s power to hold our interest becomes altogether dependent upon whether or not we are capable of discerning in the event signs that some timelessly inspiring principle was immanently present in the original moment out of which the tale, and the imperative of its telling, arose.

Principle alone, however, does not make for the greatness that merits immortal fame. As intimated above, some principles make for notoriety; and so the principles for the sake of which the actor acts ought to be held in high esteem by that public whose acclaim is desired. But greatness also depends upon the worth of the actor’s ends and upon the absolute magnitude of his act, a magnitude that is compounded of both the force of will manifested in the act and the measure of the obstacles which the actor has sought to overcome. Presumably, these considerations explain why Arendt regards courage as the foremost political virtue, for it alone enables the actor to act over against the obstacles, both inward and outward, that might deter another from acting in the same situation.<sup>78</sup> As Arendt observes, real courage is required of anyone who dares to depart from the comfortable obscurity of the private sphere in order to step forth into the brightly lit precincts of the political realm.<sup>79</sup> And where the objective risks attending, and the difficulties in the way of, a given action are large, even greater courage is required.

Thus far political action has been depicted as signifying a mode of activity that answers to the human aspirations of self-manifestation and immortalization. There is, however, a tension between these two ends in Arendt’s formulation. Immortalization is understood in terms of acts of greatness, which in turn are understood in terms of the principles and virtues such acts are held to signify. But virtues and principles, being of a universal and typological nature, are ill-suited to convey the unique and unrepeatable nature of the actor.<sup>80</sup> How, then, can action be construed as both a medium of immortalization and a vehicle of self-manifestation?

To answer this question, it is necessary to differentiate between the criterion of greatness that the political realm lays upon the actor who would secure immortal fame and the aspiration of the actor to obtain the immortalization of who he uniquely is. In pursuit of the latter, the actor must meet the standard of the former, albeit that neither greatness per se,

nor the virtue manifest in a single great action are capable of denoting the unique self of the actor. But in the course of a public life that includes many such actions, the actor will disclose a self which in its uniqueness and specificity transcends the generic virtues of character, and thus the principles, that such actions will also manifest. Thus the unique self that a life of action reveals is not to be conflated with a catalogue of traits and principles; rather, as observed in the preceding section of this chapter, Arendt conceives of the self as a singularity whose uniqueness can only be revealed *in*, and *as*, the narrative of its own public becoming. In sum, because uniqueness revealing and immortality bestowing stories are told only about the doers of great deeds, the actor must strive for greatness. But even as he thus strives, so much more than greatness is displayed.

### *Freedom and Necessity*

At the beginning of this chapter it was suggested that attending to the dichotomies that underlie Arendt's conception of action would elucidate this conception while clarifying the "content problem." And yet to this point, though Arendt's conception of action has come into focus, the "content problem" remains unaddressed. By turning to the dichotomy of freedom and necessity, we shall overcome this lacuna quite directly.<sup>81</sup>

The third and most comprehensive of Arendt's essential binaries is the polarity of freedom and necessity. For Arendt, man is the being who is capable of willing the objectification of his uniqueness and of securing relative immortality thereby. In accordance with this capacity he encounters his world as a place in which it is possible for him to achieve these twin ends. In short, his encounter with the world assumes his freedom; it assumes his ability to will himself against that within himself which is not truly himself and against that which is not particular to his identity but is merely common to the species. It assumes man possesses this freedom at least up to a point, at least within certain limits.

Limits: Freedom traces its limit as it advances against that which opposes it, as it transcends what had before seemed to be its limit. By definition, the limit and essential antagonist of freedom is necessity.<sup>82</sup> Whether the primordial experience of necessity delineates the limit of freedom, or the primordial experience of freedom delineates the limits of necessity, does not matter for Arendt nearly as much as the fact that they mutually entail one another.

Necessity: The human animal is perhaps unique for foreseeing its own death, but like any other animal it does what it can to forestall it. In grasping his mortality man implicitly acknowledges the organic basis of his existence and the imperatives this animal substrate imposes upon him.

At the simplest level, these imperatives impress themselves upon him as necessity and must be addressed.<sup>83</sup> Instinct moves him, seems to necessitate him, leads him.

One might suppose that biological necessity would carry humankind along like all the other species: one generation following another, each coming and going with the cyclical uniformity of infinite repetition. But this lot has not befallen man. A willfulness born of human self-awareness and set against the natural impulses of the species seems to have insured that the members of the species would rebel against impulse-ordered happiness.<sup>84</sup> For reasons we cannot explore in detail here, Western man in particular has long refused to identify his essential being with his animal existence. Suffice it to say that from a very early age civilization sets for each of us the task of controlling ourselves, which in the first instance means learning to control our bodies. By these early efforts to achieve self-mastery we constitute, or become aware of, a will which is somehow not identical with the body which we are commanded to regulate, a will which henceforth will be the center of our sense of identity. The will which achieves mastery over the elemental forces of the body, a body which would necessitate one completely if not thus constrained, is a free will, a will free within the limits of its mastery.<sup>85</sup> This freedom, and the subjective pleasure taken in it, is the source of human dignity and pride.<sup>86</sup> This triumph over embodied necessity is of course only the first freedom, but it is as such the precondition of those free activities within which humans reveal their identities.

For Arendt, the territories conquered by the forces of freedom are never wholly secure. In man himself and in his political life, the forces of necessity remain strong even when occluded from vision by the radiance of a freedom whose victories are always precarious, always in need of being resecured. As both the horrors of our age, and the "bovine" existence of the masses make clear, the tendency of man to succumb to necessity remains strong. Vigilance on behalf of freedom remains essential always.

At the conceptual level, Arendt's interest in freedom, and its preconditions, translates into a multifaceted vision of man, the spaces of his life-world, and the nature of his activities, a vision which continuously discriminates between what belongs to freedom and what belongs to necessity.

At the level of value, Arendt is a partisan of freedom. Necessity by its very irrepressibility makes itself felt in every age. It needs no champions, though today it surely does not lack them. Freedom is a far more fragile flower, in need of all the support it can get. Arendt's writings are framed to provide such support.

Lasting and passing. Uniqueness and sameness. Freedom and necessity: three polar oppositions arising from the depths of man's condition and from the most basal levels of his life experience, three dyads at the root of every other distinction Arendt originates, constituting the substrate of her thought. Three, yet not even three, but one. One, refracted to discriminate three planes of analysis, three dimensions of concern which are indissolubly fused to constitute a single overarching bipolar conception of man in his world. On the one side are freedom, uniqueness, and permanence entailing one another in a way which we have yet to delineate fully; on the other side, likewise requiring coordinate elaboration, are necessity, uniformity, and evanescence. Ultimately, each of the terms takes its particular meaning from its relation to the rest. This does not mean, however, that each term, or even that each paired antithesis, plays as significant a role as the others in the course of Arendt's analysis. Freedom is Arendt's preeminent concern; and, as we shall see, the truly comprehensive binary—incorporating the other two as moments of its own elucidation—is the antithesis of freedom and necessity. We turn again to it now to unfold it in greater detail, and in the course of our close analysis Arendt's idiosyncratic solution to the "content problem" will become fully explicable.

*Freedom: A Closer Look.* For Arendt man is the animal born with the potential to become human. This is the most important fact about him. Man possesses an animal nature but is not identical with it; thus he is not a natural animal.<sup>87</sup> Rather, he is given to himself, not as himself, but in order to become what he wills himself to be and indeed, ultimately, to will more than himself. In a word, man is free. Unlike the other animals man is not necessitated in all he does, but he becomes the bearer of responsibility for what he does and for the kind of man he becomes because most all he does he does out of his freedom.<sup>88</sup> Whatever he does he could always have done otherwise, being free. Thus, even when he follows pure impulse and no act of will seems to be entailed, Arendt would hold—here obviously following Aristotle—that implicitly or silently his will willed that that inner impulse be followed. That he experienced no struggle of wills within him and acted reflexively without a moment's thought does not mean his will was not involved. As he acts, he wills and as he wills, he acts. Whatsoever he does, whosoever he is, through his freedom he is his author, and as such is rightly held accountable.

In taking this position, Arendt sets herself squarely against much that passes for wisdom in our era. Against the determinisms of (for example) psychology, sociology, and economics, Arendt insists upon attributing to man a maximum degree of responsibility for himself.<sup>89</sup> To her view, the