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# On Public Action: Rhetoric, Opinion, and Glory in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*

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**Abstract:** This essay explores Hannah Arendt's contribution to our understanding of the rhetorical as opposed to the aesthetic quality of public speech, with an emphasis upon her conception of opinion and glory. Arendt's focus on the revelatory quality of public action in speech is widely understood to preclude or seriously limit its communicative aspect. I argue that this is a misunderstanding, and that accepting it would reduce speech not merely to the discussion of a sharply limited set of topics, but to no topics at all. Public action is speech that reveals the speaker as "answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done." Such revelatory speech is most appropriately judged by the standard of the glorious and the inglorious. Because such speech must inform as well as reveals, so does *glorious* or *great* speech rise to the level of greatness in part because of what is said, to whom, where, and how. Arendt's understanding of this is shown to have significant parallels to the ordinary language philosophy of Stanley Cavell.

**Keywords:** Arendt; Cavell; *doxa*; glory; greatness; Heidegger; judgment; opinion; Orwell; political; reality; rhetoric; Socrates; speech; Thucydides.

Of the major political theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, none appears more promising as a theorist of political rhetoric than Hannah Arendt. Her radicalised Aristotelian conception of political action restores public speech to its central place in political life without, in the style of some proponents of deliberative democracy, reducing that speech to a set of abstract commitments uttered to and by members of an idealised moral/political/rational community. Arendt does not simply celebrate public speech as a form of action; she also seeks to improve our understanding of what such speech entails. Her distinctions between action, on the

one hand, and work and labor, on the other; her dramaturgical conception of political speech as the revelation of the public person as opposed to the private self; and her emphasis upon the necessity of a plurality of perspectives as a precondition for such revelatory action all promise to add greatly to our ability to understand what political rhetoric is and how it might be defended against the attacks launched against it since Plato – attacks that reverberate in our references to “mere” or “empty” rhetoric. Numerous critics have argued, however, that Arendt is unable to fulfill this promise, and that her conception of politics is in the end an *aesthetic* one. The central difficulty here is her stringent demand that political speech, as action, not collapse into a form of (productive) work or *poiesis*. As pure *praxis* that does not *produce* an outcome, it would seem that political speech cannot in principle serve any instrumental purpose. The political must remain wholly distinct from what Arendt terms *the social*. Rhetorical political action thus begins to look every bit as empty as Socrates argues it is in Plato’s *Gorgias*, where the rhetorician’s “technique of persuasion” is said to allow him to appear among the ignorant as wise, noble, and just, though he himself knows nothing of these matters. Here, if anything, the gap is more profound: on the Platonic account, rhetoric allows political leaders to hide their ignorance from the *demos* and the *demos* to hide from the fact that they prefer to be flattered and entertained than to be told hard truths. On the Arendtian account, genuinely political speech will not even give voice to ignorant opinions about “social” matters, but will pass such questions over altogether in silence. Political rhetoric is purged of the evils Plato found in it only by being disengaged from the work that Plato as well as we expect it to do. Nor is this a superficial misreading of Arendt. Indeed, as I note in the essay that follows, on at least one very public occasion Arendt herself agrees to this interpretation of the implications of her central categorical distinctions. Nonetheless, it is, I argue, a mistaken reading of her work. Though her sometimes-awkward formulations do not always make this as plain as it should be, Arendt provides a theory of politics in which rhetoric plays a substantial and even noble role. Indeed, Arendt provides the elements of a general theory of rhetoric in her discussions of *opinion* as rhetoric’s field and object and of *glory* as the standard by which the diverse and varied instances of political rhetoric can be judged. My discussion takes these in turn, after first reviewing the main lines of the Arendtian conception of the political.

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The central Arendtian text in this regard is surely *The Human Condition*. Fifty years after its initial publication, this text continues to hold an extraordinary authority amongst political theorists. Arendt’s third and arguably

greatest book makes a number of startling claims about topics as varied as: the distinction between power, violence, and strength; the political significance of promises and forgiveness; intimacy; the human impulse towards immortality; the relation between modern science, skepticism, and politics; and the above-mentioned distinctions between action, work and labor. But surely its central concern is with the political as public action in speech and deed. Although it has been claimed by a prominent and skilled Arendt scholar that Arendt does not reify or “hypostasize” the adjective “political” into a noun, she does so repeatedly, both in English and, for obvious reasons, more systematically in her German edition of *The Human Condition*.<sup>1</sup> As the phrase evidently refers not to a set of practices but instead a singular *concept*, it is hardly surprising then that Arendt repeatedly refers as well to “the concept of the political”.<sup>2</sup> The phrase naturally brings Carl Schmitt’s famous or rather infamous concept to mind, and, indeed, Arendt’s concept of the political invites comparison with that laid out by Schmitt thirty years earlier. Where Schmitt’s analysis betrays Weber’s influence in its focus on politics as a sphere of largely physical action in which violence has a special priority, in Arendt, political action has a linguistic and rhetorical aspect that can be ignored only at the cost of casting the political into oblivion. And it is this that accounts for the most important divergences between her concept of the political and that advanced by Schmitt – in particular her focus on judgment (*Urteilkraft*) as opposed to decision (*Entscheidung*), on publicity as a condition of plurality rather than a mode of sovereign authority, on the achievement of immortality rather than the granting of meaning to death, and finally her preference for a form of friendship which keeps the walls of the self intact over any sort of ecstatic union with the group that might encourage self-sacrifice. If both Schmitt and Arendt are revisiting and renewing Aristotle’s foundational attempt to define the political (*to politikon*), in her emphasis on speech and public deliberation Arendt is

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1. Hanna Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3; but cf. Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 215. It is odd that the English 1958 edition of HC continues to be treated as the definitive version of that book, as Arendt made a number of changes to it when she published it in German in 1960 as *Arendt, Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben* (Stuttgart: Piper, 1960; hereafter VA). Of the English version, Arendt herself suggested that its structure did not represent an exhaustive and definitive statement of her views or even a considered plan on her part. See in this regard the comments quoted by Ursula Ludz in *Arendt, Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Ursula Ludz (München: Piper, 2003), 213, n. 12.
  2. See, e.g., G. Gaus, *Gespräch mit Hannah Arendt* (Piper, 1965), 20 and Arendt, “Einführung in die Politik II”, in Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*, 41ff.

surely truer to Aristotle than is Schmitt – a fact that would no doubt mean more to her than it would to Schmitt, the inveterate modernist.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt fleshes out her concept of the political through an idealised portrait of the ancient Greek *polis* as exemplified by Athens. The *polis* on Arendt's account was a second "order of existence" in which the citizen left behind what was "his own" and entered into "what is common"<sup>3</sup> (HC, 24). Arendt pointedly associates the *idion* of "one's own" with the idiotic, on the grounds that the private is not an order of existence essentially characterised by action and speech (HC, 38). Action (*praxis*, *Handeln*) and speech (*lexis*, *Reden*) are the only two activities considered by the Greeks to be political (or, as Arendt puts it in her German translation of *The Human Condition*, *eigentlich politisch*, actually or properly political [VA, 29]). But of these two it is speech that is of central importance. Politics for Arendt is *essentially* a matter of speaking in a condition of plurality: "speechless action", she writes, "would no longer be action" (HC, 178). It is "speech [that] makes man a political being". But if speech is what makes man political, the speech involved must be *public* speech if it itself is to be political.<sup>4</sup> Where labor – the production of objects of consumption – and work – the production of enduring parts of the common world – can both in principle be performed in private isolation, political action in speech, like dance, requires the presence of a plurality of judges: no audience, no dance performance, at best a rehearsal – likewise, no public community, no action in speech.<sup>5</sup> Arendt makes this claim as early as the close of the second volume of 1951's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where, in explicit reference to Aristotle, she argues that rightless and stateless people who lack a fixed, worldly community of their own are deprived of something "much more fundamental than freedom and justice... They are deprived, not of the right to freedom, but of the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion."<sup>6</sup> To hold an opinion is to hold one *publicly*, as a citizen; and this requires a community or "world" of one's own in which one's words will be given a hearing.

3. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958; hereafter HC), 24.

4. It is true that Arendt sometimes seems to deny this, as when she writes, "Whenever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition" (HC, 3; emphasis mine). However, the main lines of her argument plainly imply that a private discussion between, e.g., two lovers would not be political.

5. For the analogy between political action and a dance performance, see H. Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), 152f.

6. H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 296.

Arendt argues that the *publicity* that characterises the political community entails two things. First, “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality” (HC, 50). Second,

the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or nature, [but] is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. (HC, 52)

Arendt draws out these claims in ways that make them far more counter-intuitive than they might first appear to be. Most importantly, Arendt categorically distinguishes the *reality* of the public in both its moments from any sort of *objectivity*: “the *reality* of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised” (HC, 57). Whereas objects in pure geometrical space can be defined in a unitary set of measures, political actions require a plurality of judges each of whom sees things *in her own way*.

This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation and multiplication of one’s own position with its attendant aspects and perspectives... Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear. (HC, 57)

Objectivity is not a concept that stands alone, but one paired with, and contrasted with, its double, subjectivity. The contrast between the two is developed in the modern epistemology which the contrast in turn makes possible – as, for instance, when Descartes tries to establish how the mental substance he is aware of being might properly be said to know anything about the world of physical objects which confronts him. Arendt betrays the influence of her teacher Heidegger in her rejection of the Cartesian suggestion that these categories refer to a necessary, fundamental feature

of either the world or human experience.<sup>7</sup> On Heidegger's account, both subjective experience and objective presence (*Vorhandenheit*) are derivative, deficient modes of being made possible only by a process of abstracting from the more primordial on-going temporal event of *being-in-the-world*. Heidegger's famous example of this is given in *Being and Time's* parable of the workshop, in which the carpenter's tools are there for and with him in a *handy* (*zuhandlich*) way, as things that he uses with care (*Sorge*) but without conscious attention to their "objective" qualities. The craftsman's active use of the tool and the context within which that use occurs are, for Heidegger, ontologically prior to the parts that make them up.<sup>8</sup> It is only when the tool is broken and useless that its "objectivity" emerges, and with it the similarly inactive "subjectivity" that observes it. And even here that "pure objective presence" bears the marks of the handiness into which it will return when the tool is repaired and again taken up by the craftsman.<sup>9</sup> Because the "objectivity" of the broken tool and the "subjectivity" of the craftsman gazing at it are both derivative of the primary worldly activity of the practice of the craft (e.g., carpentry), there is no room here for the distinction between facts and values associated with proponents of the subjective/objective dichotomy such as Hume and Weber. What is real is not denuded of value, just as it is not captured in a single measure. The excellence (or lack thereof) of a tool is as much a part of it as is its weight and length – indeed, more so. The same is true for Arendt's conception of worldly reality. In part because she is less concerned than Heidegger with modern philosophy's misleading (and allegedly dangerous) emphasis upon the epistemological question of how a subject might come to know an object, Arendt does not focus upon a more fundamental unitary *Gestalt* like being-in-the-world or *Sorge*, but rather presents the subjective and the objective as simply misleading ways of characterising the human perspective and the world opened up by that perspective. Her term for the latter is *reality*; the former she characterises in terms of *opinion* and *judgment*. Opinion and judgment do not (as in what she terms "subjective philosophy") dimly trace the outlines of the real and respond to them affectively;

7. The question of Heidegger's influence on Arendt is still debated. Given Arendt's scathing attack upon him in H. Arendt "What is Existenz Philosophy?", *Partisan Review* 18 no. 1: 35–46, there is some reason for this. Nonetheless, as shall become clear, there are good reasons to take Arendt at her word when she writes of HC, in a letter to Heidegger of October 28, 1960, "the book evolved directly from the first Marburg days and it owes you just about everything in every regard." E. Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 114.

8. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Stambaugh (trans.) (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 64.

9. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68.

instead, reality is what is made manifest in our opinions about the world and our judgments about public action within that world. As in Heidegger, there is an emphasis upon activity rather than observation. Indeed, for both, observation must be understood as itself a form of worldly activity, a way of living.

In worldly activity, the distinction between what *is* and what *seems to be* will always be a relative matter; or, to be more precise, what *is* will always be a variant of what *appears* to be the case. In cutting a piece of wood in the workshop, the craftsman might stop and check if the wood is *really* as stable and well supported as it seems to be. But this reality emerges only in the face of the particular need to make this cut, here, now; it is in no sense an absolute matter. Such reality is a quite a different thing than, say, Descartes' ideal of an experience of the objective world that could not be the product of an all-powerful evil demon intent on deceiving him. Heidegger brings this out in his 1935 lecture course *Introduction to Metaphysics*, where he argues that "appearing belongs to Being [and] Being has its essence together *with* appearing."<sup>10</sup> For creatures such as ourselves, appearance is primordial and inescapable. This is something Heidegger argues was recognised by the ancient Greeks in their understanding of *doxa*, commonly if (according to Heidegger) misleadingly translated as *opinion*. "*Doxa*", he writes,

is the respect [*Ansehen*] in which someone stands, and in a wider sense, the aspect [*Ansehen*] that each being possesses and displays in its look [*Aussehen*] (*eidos, idea*). A city offers a grand vista. The view that a being has in itself, and so first can offer from itself, lets itself be apprehended at this or that time, from this or that viewpoint. The vista that offers itself alters with each new viewpoint. Thus the view is also one that we take and make for ourselves. In experiencing and busying ourselves with beings, we constantly construct views for ourselves from their look.<sup>11</sup>

The main lines of this position are echoed in Arendt's best discussion of the opinion in which worldly reality emerges, that laid out in a 1954 lecture alternately entitled "Philosophy and Politics" and "Socrates".<sup>12</sup> Here

10. M. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (trans.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 108.

11. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 109.

12. The essay was initially published in English under the first title in *Social Research* 57, no.1 (Spring 1990). I shall refer to the more readily accessible version published under the second



Arendt argues that, in the Greek *polis* prior to the Platonic imposition of the notion of opinion as a lesser, incomplete form of knowledge, opinion or *doxa* named the individual's phenomenological or perspectival experience of the world. As she puts it,

To Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, 'of what appears to me.' This *doxa* had as its topic not what Aristotle calls the *eikos*, the probable, the many *verisimilia* (as distinguished from the *unum verum*, the one truth, on the one hand, and the limitless falsehoods, the *falsa infinita*, on the other) but comprehended the world "as it opens itself up to me". It was not, therefore, subjective fantasy and arbitrariness, but was also not something absolute and valid for all. The assumption was that the world opens differently to every man according to his position in it; and that the "sameness" of the world, its commonness (*koinon*, as the Greeks would say, "common to all") or "objectivity" (as we would say from the subjective viewpoint of modern philosophy), resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone.<sup>13</sup>

This passage repeats many of the themes we have already found in *The Human Condition*, which Arendt would publish only a few years later. But the passage's reference to subjective fantasy adds a helpful note. On Arendt's account, the public world is a perspectival matter: there is no "view from nowhere", in Thomas Nagel's felicitous phrase. What is real is always seen from a particular perspective, a *view* seen from a particular point. Even the most "objective" view onto a thing – a blueprint, the measures of an object's weight and dimensions in space, a photograph – reveal their partiality in what they leave out – the cost of the thing, its color, its relative size in relation to the objects in its immediate environment, and so on. Arendt's reference, in the passage above, to "subjective fantasy and arbitrariness" reminds us of what is too easily overlooked in this account: that one's perspective actually be a perspective *onto the thing in question*. Not any "opinion" I happen to have will be an opinion in this sense.

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title in H. Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, Jerome Kohn (ed.) (New York: Schocken, 2005). Dana Villa also notes the extent to which Arendt follows Heidegger here. D. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 151ff. and 305, note 94.

13. Arendt, "Socrates", *The Promise of Politics*, 14.

An example may be helpful here. Take the question of whether Iran in early 2009 was actively developing a nuclear weapons program and, if so, what ought to be done about it. As far as I can determine, no one knew for sure the answer to this question. But it was (and, obviously, is) a political matter upon which the world could hardly responsibly refrain from judgment. My opinion on this and related matters might reveal “the world as it opens itself up to me” in a variety of ways. If I were convinced that the Iranians are currently working hard to develop nuclear weapons, this might reflect my sense that Iran poses a standing threat to Israel and that Israel’s defense is of overriding importance. If I felt that Iran needed to be threatened or attacked because they might be developing nuclear weapons, this might reflect my sense that order and decent behavior (in this case, *ex hypothesi*, not producing nuclear weapons) can only be produced by the threat of force. If I doubted that Iran were developing nuclear weapons, this might reflect my sense that the United States tends to exaggerate the threats that it faces in order to surreptitiously justify its power grabs, particularly in those parts of the world that produce large quantities of oil. And so on. The crucial point is that this sort of revelation of “the world as it opens itself up to me” is categorically distinct from a revelation of the world that is based upon actual observation of the matter at hand. All of the opinions that I have discussed thus far might be held by people who have given no sustained thought to the question, who have not actually looked at the relevant reports and the relevant data, who know nothing of the history of the region, of the relevant behavior of Iran’s political leaders, of the steps and time involved in the development of advanced weapons systems, and so on. Two such people whiling away the afternoon in a bar arguing about politics might well express their opinions about Israel, about authority and responsibility, and about American hegemony. But do they express opinions in anything but the most trivial sense about the question of whether Iran is developing nuclear weapons and what ought to be done or not done about it? I would argue that they do not, precisely because these things can be revealed without any reference being made to Iran or nuclear weapons at all. One has only to discuss the war in Gaza, the American debacle in Iraq, or similarly unrelated issues to bring out precisely the same things. The possibility of an Iranian weapons program can open itself up only to those who look at *it*. Only so can one be said to have an opinion as opposed to a “subjective fantasy” regarding it. And only then can we be said to see, as Arendt puts it, “sameness in utter diversity”.

The point here is not that one must be an expert to have a political opinion, least of all that an expert knows (best) the answers to any vexed political question such as this. As I trust is obvious, the list of matters that I

suggested should be considered by one actually holding an opinion on this matter is not exhaustive; no particular item on it is a necessary precondition for a *doxa* on this matter to emerge; such matters need to be weighed and interpreted, and such interpretations will bring out the larger “world-view” of the various individuals; and, finally, the amount of care one must devote to the consideration of such matters is not something that can be determined to a nicety, least of all in absence of a discussion of the matter. Indeed, as we have seen, discussion of the matter is crucial for Arendt. One can have an opinion in her sense only when one has access to the political realm, only when others will hear and respond to that opinion. This is not only a matter of making oneself heard, as in contemporary debates concerning whether freedom of opinion requires at least some control of the media that allows access to large enough numbers of persons to make the expression of one’s opinion more than an essentially private gesture. One must also have the ability to have one’s opinion be challenged by others who have considered or seen the same matter from their own perspective, and are in a position to challenge one’s claims. In the 1954 “Socrates” article, Arendt brings this out in a rather obscure discussion of how Socrates sought in his exchanges with his fellow Athenians “to find the truth in their *doxa*”.<sup>14</sup> It is hardly obvious what this phrase might mean. Given Arendt’s rejection of the position she associates with Plato, it cannot mean, “helping the other to turn what is now mere opinion into actual knowledge of the truth.” But then what room is there for any Socratic, maieutic help? One’s *doxa* is what it is. As Arendt on the same page puts it, there is “an inherent truth” to each opinion. If I have actually considered the matter, and not simply given voice to my prejudices or my thoughts on related matters, I have my *doxa*, and it is already as true as it is going to be. But this assumes that my *doxa* is in fact *mine*. Is this assumption warranted?

It seems clear on reflection that it is not. Consider a member of an oppressed minority group who has carefully considered the matter in question, and who is in a position to give voice effectively to her opinion. Meeting such criteria in no way guarantees that she will be seeing things from the actual perspective that she in fact occupies. It is a commonplace that a dominant or “hegemonic” culture is often (though not always) embraced by those it marginalises and oppresses. Take the example of a young woman in a sexist culture that considers women as sexual objects. Looking in the bathroom mirror, she puts her makeup on or adjusts her hair, gauging the effect carefully. She judges the effect – judges herself – through the eyes of someone else – a callow young reader of *Maxim* magazine, for instance. In

14. Arendt, “Socrates”, *The Promise of Politics*, 15 and passim.

such a case, what seems to be her perspective is in reality the perspective of someone else.<sup>15</sup> This “other” may not be a man, perhaps – it may rather be that of another woman or group of women who themselves have taken up such a perspective as their own. The important point is that it is not the young woman’s own; and that such unexpected facts can most easily come out in a situation in which one is describing what one thinks one sees to people who see things differently, and are prepared to ask difficult and perhaps unwelcome questions concerning the nature of her beliefs and the implications of them.<sup>16</sup> If such questions prod her towards adopting the viewpoint that is her own, they might be said to have brought out the truth in her *doxa*. Doing this might involve a period of disorientation in which she does not know quite how she looks at things. This is manifest in the Platonic texts that Arendt (ironically) relies upon in drawing the picture of Socrates as her anti-Plato. In these texts, Socrates’ interlocutors regularly leave the discussion at a loss how to describe the virtues they and Socrates attempted to define, virtues they previously thought they understood and practiced quite well. Bringing out the truth in their *doxa* required that they pass through the confusion of throwing off the prejudice of custom and habit and looking at the matter for themselves – then, as now, an unfamiliar exercise.

The confrontation between different opinions not only allows for those holding those opinions to reflect on whether they are in fact committed to them. More fundamentally, it also allows for the opinion *as opinion* to be revealed. If I take my opinion regarding a political matter to be the obvious, uncontestable truth, I will not be aware of myself holding an opinion at all. If, say, patriarchy is experienced by me as part of the natural order of things, my approval of it is not so much an opinion I hold regarding it as it

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15. This assumes, of course, that her adoption of this viewpoint is not self-conscious and strategic, which it well might be. If this interpretation seems to turn Arendt into an advocate of Rousseauian authenticity, consider Heidegger’s early conception of *Eigentlichkeit* as a matter of making what is already one’s own (*eigen*) truly one’s own – appropriating what is proper to us, and subverting the norm of inauthenticity within which “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself”. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 120. Similarly, readers of the Socrates piece who focus on the extent to which bringing out the truth in a person’s *doxa* is a matter of revealing it to others (“in the truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other’s opinion”) should recall that Arendt opens up this discussion by announcing that “just as nobody can know beforehand the other’s *doxa*, so nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion”. Arendt, “Socrates”, *The Promise of Politics*, 15 and 17–18.

16. Arendt notes that Socrates’ midwifery largely consisted in the extraction of a statement’s “hidden or latent implications”. H. Arendt, *Lectures On Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Ronald Beiner (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 41.

is a fact about the world that I (believe myself to) recognise, as I recognise that warm clothing is a help in cold weather and wealth a blessing in any. It is only when I experience another's opinion of patriarchy – say, that it is irrational and degrading for all concerned – that I achieve the distance from patriarchy necessary to judge it and to have an opinion on it. And the more such opinions I (thoughtfully) encounter, the richer will be my understanding of patriarchy and myself as a citizen among others holding an opinion of it. This is the deeper sense of Arendt's claim that opinions are not held by human beings in private, but by citizens, in public. "Opinions", as she puts it in *On Revolution*, "are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinions exists, there may be moods – moods of the masses and moods of individuals, the latter no less fickle and unreliable than the former – but no opinion."<sup>17</sup> Or, as she puts it in "Truth and Politics",

I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look at the world from a different perspective; this is a question not of empathy, ...but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.<sup>18</sup>

If Arendt appears here to conflate holding a valid opinion with holding an opinion as such, this is because an opinion, as an actual worldly relation with its object, already has some validity (or, as she puts it in "Socrates", "inherent truth"). This validity is only increased when the opinion is confronted with other opinions that test it and expand its grasp of its multifaceted object. Arendt associates this greater validity with the shift from the citizen to the statesman who excels in political life:

If we wanted to define, traditionally, the one outstanding view of the statesman, we could say that it consists in understanding the greatest possible number and variety of viewpoints ... as these realities open

17. Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 260–61.

18. Arendt, "Truth and Politics", *Between Past and Future*, 241.

themselves up to the various opinions of citizens; and, at the same time, in being able to communicate between the citizens and their opinions so that the commonness of the world becomes apparent.<sup>19</sup>

The worldly reality of political action, then, is one that is “opened up” by a plurality of opinions, each of which reflects an actual engagement with the matter at hand (I must witness *the deed*) and which can be more or less truthful in the sense of being one’s own (I must witness the deed). Like a work of art which can accurately and precisely be described in a variety of terms – historical, formal, material, political, and so on – so a political act opens itself up to a variety of “readings”, each of which bring out something that is there, in the act itself, and not just accidentally aroused in the subject observing the act. It is the talking about it from different perspectives that brings out the various aspects of the thing in question. “There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular... Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves” (HC 4; compare HC 204). Just as we interpret or make sense of a text by producing another text, so events in the world make sense to us in so far as we (can) express that meaning in words. “Action”, as Arendt was fond of saying, “reveals itself fully only to the storyteller” (HC, 192). Though Arendt herself is fairly vague about the specifics of the role language plays in this process, her focus on it here is extraordinarily suggestive, as language requires precisely this open-ended yet structured evaluation. A particular linguistic utterance cannot mean just anything; its meaning is not a matter of subjective preference, like the preference for Coke or Canary Wine over Pepsi. But neither is it tightly and rigidly constrained; what is *meant* is meaningful for a particular group of fellow speakers in a particular situation or set of situations, each of whom has her own concerns and ideas within which what is said will appear as meaning what it does – which is to say, as meaningful *überhaupt*. Failing to mean something in *these* contexts to *these* people, the sentences lie there like messages in a bottle, to be wondered at but not understood by whoever might find them.<sup>20</sup>

19. Arendt, “Socrates”, 18.

20. Obviously this failure will be forestalled if others can imaginatively reconstruct the context and interests of the original speakers. In my emphasis here and throughout this essay on what might be termed the ordinary language aspects of Arendt’s existential political theory I follow the account laid out in S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) and S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). For a short summary of Cavell’s analysis,

Truly political speech has two further, interrelated qualities: it is potentially *glorious* and it is *revelatory*. Political speech reveals who one is, but who one is as a public person as opposed to a private individual. In speaking in a condition where one's words are understood and judged by many, from a variety of different perspectives, one attains a multi-faceted reality quite different from the *depth* of one's intimate relations and passions. Entry into political life is thus a "second birth" (HC, 176, 178). The cost of this second birth is, of necessity, that one cannot completely control who this second self will be. As the public person is a matter of deeds and words in public, it is a matter of words and deeds *as they are understood and appraised by others*, and this is something over which the initial individual has little or no control. As Arendt rather misleadingly puts it, "nobody is the author or producer of his life story" (HC, 184). This is misleading in so far it suggests that someone else *is* their author. But the point is rather that I *am* the author of my words and deeds, but that, as public deeds, they are of necessity objects of the understanding and interpretation of others, and hence out of my (sovereign) control. The people who hear and judge my words cannot, if they are to describe and respond to me and my words, say just anything they want. They are not, that is, authors in the sense that Jane Austen or Samuel Beckett is. They are, rather, historians who record (versions of) what I did, or like the readers of Austen and Beckett whose interpretations of their texts must respond to and remain true to the details of those texts. Perhaps surprisingly, Arendt's understanding of this resembles that of Stanley Fish in his 1972 book *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, where he argues that textual objects of interpretation are in part constructed by their audience: "the proper object of [literary] analysis is not the work, but the reader." When we read, "the work as object tends to disappear", to consume itself, to be replaced by the work as the reading subject's experience. Thus, "what it [a given text] does is what it means".<sup>21</sup> What is true of Fish's seventeenth century texts is true of Arendt's public speech, with the caveat that political words are, by virtue of their audience, subject to a greater interpretive pressure than any private words or deeds or any text by Bacon or Browne.

In showing the speaker where she is and as who she is, political speech exposes the speaker, in the Heideggerian imagery Arendt makes her own,

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see the introduction to Norris, *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). For somewhat different accounts of Arendt that are similarly beholden to Cavell's work, see H. Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* and L. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

21. S. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 4 and 393.

to the brightness of the public realm, a brightness it takes real courage to face (HC, 35–36). In this exposure, the speaker's words are judged by a standard of greatness, one that Arendt believes moderns consistently misunderstand. Her formulation in *The Human Condition* of what moderns miss is not, however, immediately enlightening. She writes,

In distinction from modern understanding, [great] words [of political actors] were not considered to be great because they expressed great thoughts; on the contrary, as we know from the last lines of the *Antigone*, it may be the capacity for 'great words' (*megaloi logoi*) with which to reply to striking blows that will eventually teach thought in old age. (HC, 25)

Arendt's thought here is clearer in her German translation of *The Human Condition*: "*Hier entspringt die Einsicht und mit ihr das Denken aus dem Sprechen, und nicht umgekehrt*" (VA, 29). "Here the insight or judgment and with it the thought arise *from* the speech, and not the other way around." That is to say, the greatness of speech is not a matter of inherently great ideas, but of their being spoken, and hence of their being spoken in a particular context, to particular people, and in a particular way.<sup>22</sup> Appreciating this helps us understand Arendt's claim that, for the Greeks, not only was "most political action ... transacted in words, but more fundamentally ... finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action" (HC, 26). "Thought was secondary to speech", not in the sense that great words do not communicate or convey information, but in the sense that the greatness of the words is a matter of the situation, and not simply the information they convey. To tell someone, for instance, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" conveys vividly that fear makes a dangerous situation yet more dangerous – "information" that may well be helpful or correct. But it is *great* only when these particular words are uttered by a particular person, and in a particular situation – a situation such as FDR's first Inaugural Address in 1933. It is in this sense that political speech is

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22. Note that Heidegger makes almost exactly the same claim as Arendt in *What is Thinking?* ("only when man speaks, does he think – not the other way around, as metaphysics still believes") and does so in the context of a discussion of our ignorance of the richness of "the craft of the hand" – that is to say, in the context of a discussion of the relationship between thought and action. "All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking. Therefore, thinking is man's simplest, and for that reason hardest, handiwork, if it would be accomplished at its proper time." Heidegger, *What is Thinking?* J. Glenn Gray (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 16–17.



not first and foremost a means of persuasion, but “the specifically human way of answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done” (HC, 26). Great political words are persuasive precisely because they answer to the situation in the way that FDR’s did – not because they express information that is found to be “correct”.<sup>23</sup> As Arendt puts it, political action in speech “illuminate[s] historical time” (HC, 43).<sup>24</sup>

If this is right, it remains true that Arendt’s emphasis upon the greatness of political speech is nonetheless disturbing for many, to whom the language of greatness and glory uncomfortably recalls Machiavelli’s argument that political deeds should not be judged by the standards of private life but by whether they achieve and make possible the *glory* of establishing and preserving effective political institutions. Arendt encourages such worries when she writes,

the innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word is independent of victory and defeat, and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by their consequences for better or worse. Unlike human behavior, – which the Greeks, like all civilized people, judged according to “moral standards,” taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other – action can only be judged by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where what is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis* (HC, 205).

Arendt’s literary executor and student Jerome Kohn has tried to convince me that in this passage Arendt is not speaking for herself but simply describing what she thought was true for the ancient Greeks. Her phrasing and the immediate context, however, make plain that this reading is

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23. Aleksey Dubilet has reminded me in this context that speeches such as FDR’s are more often than not the work of a speechwriter or team of speechwriters. I do not think this undermines the argument here; rather it points to another aspect of the Arendtian distinction between the private self and the public person. The public person FDR is the work of many people, including the private individual Franklin Delano Roosevelt, his staff and family, and, most importantly, the audience that “read” and immortalised his work.

24. The speaker who succeeds at this attains “immortality” in the sense that his action in speech reveals his time for other times as well (HC, 17ff.). For a contemporary example of a speech that might be said to do this, consider Barack Obama’s March 18, 2008 address, “A More Perfect Union.” On greatness as measuring up to what was said or done, compare Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 65.

untenable. Though Arendt refers to Aristotle, Pericles, Thucydides, and Homer, she also consistently writes that they *express* or *preserve* truths that are not theirs alone. Arendt's readers are thus forced to ask why she might celebrate public action that could be amoral or even immoral. An initial response might well focus upon the fact that Arendt's examples differ from Machiavelli's in that they are of speakers who are both glorious and, in a more pedestrian way, moral or decent. Machiavelli infamously celebrates a political leader who murders a harsh but loyal lieutenant and leaves his body on the public square; Arendt celebrates the leader of the Athenian democrats, the founder of Western ethical philosophy, and the American Founding Fathers. This should alert us to the fact that Arendt argues only that public, political action should be judged by a different standard than that appropriate to private life – not that it would be found viciously immoral if it *were* judged by the standards of private life.

That said, a worry nonetheless remains. Even if what Arendt celebrates is not actively immoral, why take the apparently dangerous step of unloosening it from moral evaluation? Why introduce another mode of evaluation that could in principle contest and even override that of morality? Such concerns are helpfully considered in conjunction with the somewhat different worry expressed by many of Arendt's readers that her distinction between the extraordinary political and the everyday "normal" routine of the social produces a formalistic or aestheticised conception of politics. On this account, in her haste to categorically distinguish the political from the social Arendt has not only removed moral standards from politics, but emptied it of all content: excluding from the political all of the "social" questions that we ordinarily take to be political, such as economic, administrative, or moral questions, Arendt has left us nothing to talk about. As Mary McCarthy put it in a 1972 roundtable discussion of Arendt's work reprinted in Melvyn Hill's *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, "I have always asked myself: 'What is somebody supposed to do on the public stage, in the public space, if he does not concern himself with the social? That is, what's left?'" And she answers that, once the basic constitutional framework has been established within which one acts,

the only thing that is left for the political man to do is what the Greeks did: make war! ... [I]f all questions of economics, human welfare, busing, anything that touches the social sphere, are to be excluded from the political scene, then... I am left with war and speeches. But the speeches can't be just speeches. They have to be speeches about something.

Arendt's response is not terribly helpful. "You are", she announces, "absolutely right, and I may admit I ask myself this question".<sup>25</sup> But, as I read Arendt, this is simply not a good question, and if it appears to be so it is not because of her distinction between the political as a realm of speech and deed in a condition of plurality and the social as a mode of common life dominated by economic matters, but because of her awkward and "blob-like" characterisation of the latter and her tendency to think of the public/private distinction in spatial terms. For it simply does not follow from the fact that political speech involves the revelation of the political person that it cannot accomplish anything else *as well*. The misunderstanding here resembles the common misinterpretation of Kant, according to which the moral agent acting solely for the sake of duty is somehow, as H. J. Paton puts it, "a perfect fool" utterly oblivious to the consequences of his acts.<sup>26</sup> Just as, in Kant, the moral agent's action is at once done "from duty" and directed towards a particular end in the world (paying back debts, keeping promises, and so on), so, in Arendt, political speech is directed, of necessity, at a particular end even as it reveals the public person of the actor.<sup>27</sup> In each case, the celebrated end is achieved only by virtue of the accomplishment of the supposedly neglected end. The Kantian moral agent is one who, out of obedience to the moral law, keeps her promises, and hence makes possible a system of credit; the Arendtian political actor is one who, in her public performance, argues for *this*, in the *these* circumstances, on *these* grounds. In her exchange with McCarthy, Arendt gestures rather feebly at this when she goes on to note that the Greeks did not only make war,

and the real flower of Athens came between the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian War... [L]ife changes constantly, and things are constantly there that want to be talked about. At all times people living together will have affairs that belong in the realm of the public—"are worthy to be talked about in public". What these matters *are* at any historical *moment* is probably *utterly* different. For instance, the great cathedrals were the public spaces of the Middle Ages... [T]here perhaps they had to talk about a matter which is not without any interest

25. "On Hannah Arendt", in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, Melvyn Hill (ed.) (New York: St. Martin's, 1970), 315–16.

26. H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 76. Compare I. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 397.

27. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 402.

either: the question of God... There will always be conflicts. And you don't need war.<sup>28</sup>

But this seems a bit overstated. While there will be variation, there will consistently be a need to deliberate a familiar set of public concerns; and these will hardly be limited to war or, in Arendt's example here, God.

Indeed, Arendt has to be understood as adopting in *The Human Condition* a more nuanced position than she acknowledges here not only to give political actors something more than war and God to talk about, but in order to allow them to speak *at all*. If political speech is supposed to be nothing more than the revelation of the public person, how could it address military and religious disputes? Moreover, what would language that was nothing more than such revelation look like? A song of oneself? Poetry? Gibberish? It is plain enough that Arendt has nothing like this in mind in *The Human Condition* when she writes there,

Action and speech ... retain their agent-revealing capacity if their content is exclusively "objective", concerned with the matters of the world in which men move... These interests constitute, in the word's most literal meaning, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and which therefore can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent. (HC, 182)

Great speech is not great *because* it conveys (great) information. But that does not mean that it does *not* convey information.<sup>29</sup> More basically, greatness is not simply a matter of people *arbitrarily* celebrating some speech or deed. Pericles' Funeral Oration, to take one of Arendt's favorite examples from *The Human Condition*, is not great because many people have positive "subjective" feelings about it. It is *really* great – though not because it is "objectively" so. What makes it so is its way – Pericles' way – of "answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done",

28. M. Hill, "On Hannah Arendt", *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 315–16.

29. G. Kateb rightly notes that for Arendt "politics is its own content in the sense that it is its own subject." The speech of political actors "deals with the creation of the conditions that make itself possible or with the preservation of those conditions." Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Toronto, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 17. But note that these matters are often addressed *indirectly*.

as we see and understand it. Standing in front of a mass grave containing the bodies of young men who died in the recently begun war with Sparta, Pericles tries to “measure up” to the awesome and heartbreaking setting and task, and in so doing to make his listeners “fall in love” with Athens and hence with their lives in Athens, to see (again) the greatness of the city within which they live and act, and for which many of them will die.<sup>30</sup> One does not have to agree with Pericles’ claims about Athens or about the idea that death on the battlefield in her defense represents the “culmination” of a life to be aware that there is something extraordinary here – that, for better or worse, his words rise to the level of greatness.<sup>31</sup> Though the glorious and the great are not judged in the same manner in which we judge the honest or the faithful, neither are judgments of them utterly willful. Just as public speech informs (or cajoles, or argues) as well as reveals, so does great speech rise to the level of greatness in part because of what is *said*, to whom, where, when, and how. This does not imply that the greatness of the speech is measured in terms of its success in persuading others. Thucydides, who preserves Pericles’ Funeral Oration for posterity, pointedly comments upon it in the chapter that follows it in his *History*, emphasising in his account of the Plague how transitory the greatness celebrated and advocated by Pericles was, how quickly the careful balance of public and private achieved by the Athenians under Pericles collapsed under the pressure of the plague and the emergence of less scrupulous leaders. But this leaves the greatness of his speech untouched. This is the meaning of Arendt’s suggestion (cited above) that “the innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word is independent of victory and defeat, and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by their consequences for better or worse.” Not that the speech does not try to accomplish something, but that its greatness (or lack thereof) is not a measure of its success in this attempt.

Because *reality* is constituted by our opinions and judgments, speech will *really* be glorious when those hearing it judge it to be so. What counts as glorious is largely up to us, just as what counts as splendid or shameful is up to us. These judgments will change as one moves between different communities and as communities themselves move through time. But Arendt will allow for only so much play in the definition of the term here,

30. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Rex Warner (trans.) (New York: Penguin, 1972), 149.

31. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 148, 149. As Margaret Canovan rightly emphasises, Arendt herself did not always approve of Pericles or of the desire for glory he represents so well. M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 193–94.

and she will sometimes refuse to call speech glorious or great even if a community of speakers is willing and ready to do so. For one thing, although it is true that she provides almost no criteria for glory or greatness, she does insist that it be public speech in the above sense – and thus that it address “the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.” For another, a high bar is set for the glorious here on account of Arendt’s evident debt to Heidegger and her consequent commitment to a conception of glory as a modification of the opinions in which reality is opened up. Heidegger, in the discussion of *doxa* referred to above, argues that “Glory, for the Greeks, is not something additional that someone may or may not receive; it is the highest manner of Being... Glory means *doxa*.”<sup>32</sup> This appears to be Arendt’s position as well: since “reality, ... humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance” (HC, 199), what appears most vividly will be *more real*, in Arendt’s sense of that term. As Arendt puts it, “Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm” (HC, 180).<sup>33</sup> As well as being concerned with public matters (and hence easily distinguished from similarly memorable “limit experiences” like taking drugs and bungee jumping), glorious speech would seem to be memorable speech precisely on these grounds. This is not a strict criterion, as what constitutes such an experience is still up to us to say. Keith Topper has urged upon me that, in the proper context, and in addressing the appropriate matter, a speech in a PTA meeting might be said to be glorious in Arendt’s sense. I think this is ultimately a matter of what the people at that meeting or those hearing about it afterwards would be prepared to say. Under anything but truly extraordinary circumstances I cannot myself imagine a speech at a PTA meeting that I would describe as glorious, though I can imagine speeches that I might well describe as great. (Think, for instance, of the courage a young mother or father would need to challenge the racism of her or his community in such a setting.) This may indicate that a certain amount of flux is built into Arendt’s position on these matters.

At this point, however, a new puzzle emerges. Though Arendt is plainly deeply impressed by Thucydides’ rendition of Pericles’ Funeral Oration, and though, as Lisa Disch has helpfully observed, Arendt’s “storytelling”

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32. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 108.

33. This plainly does not imply that *only* what is truly great is real. Quite the opposite: if what is truly great is *more* real, what does not achieve “full appearance” is *less* real, and thus for this reason real.

mode of theorising is clearly modeled at least in part upon that of Thucydides, Arendt does not refer to *other* parts of this *History*.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, she does not discuss the speeches that preceded and influenced the decisions of the respective parties of the Peloponnesian War to begin and escalate the war or to attack city-states such as Melos. Instead we find Arendt celebrating the *Apology* of Pericles' arch-rival *Socrates* as being "one of the great examples" of "rhetoric, the art of persuasion, the highest, the truly political art."<sup>35</sup> The reasons for this are not wholly obscure. Like Pericles, Socrates "measures up to his setting" by giving voice to "the world as it opens itself up to" him. He does not simply tell his audience that life without the sort of self-examination in conversation that he practiced would not be worth living – he does so when on trial for his life, when the charges against him are, as he demonstrates, intimately bound up with precisely this self-examination. And he does so in part because he believes that without such self-examination and the friendship it makes possible, his fellow citizens will tear their city apart.<sup>36</sup> Like Pericles, Socrates calls his audience back to themselves, to their life in the *polis* and to demands of that life, demands that are all too easily forgotten in the bustle of private affairs and the heated debates of political *krisis*. But it is nonetheless striking that neither the Oration nor the *Apology* are contributions to heated debates in which the members of a polity struggle to decide *what to do* about a public matter of moment. Ironically, given McCarthy's suggestion that Arendtian political discourse will address *only* questions of war and peace, neither speech argues that a war should be begun or that it should not.

The reason for this is, I suspect, that Arendt worried that heated debates in such circumstances would be too *polemical* to be *political*. Consider in this regard the following passage from *The Human Condition*:

Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. It is then no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object. This happens whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for or against other people, as for instance in modern warfare, where men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against

34. L. Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 127f.

35. Arendt, "Socrates", *The Promise of Politics*, 7.

36. This is Arendt's reading. See Arendt, "Socrates", *The Promise of Politics*, 16ff.

the enemy. In these instances, which of course have always existed, speech becomes indeed “mere talk”, simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda; here words reveal nothing. (HC, 180)

The reasoning here seems clear enough: given Arendt’s insistence that action be categorically distinguished from fabrication, speech as action cannot be wholly subsumed by the production of a political effect such as the confusion of the enemy or the growth of domestic support for a given war. Should it be subsumed, speech would lose its inherent value, and be valued solely as the means to the given end, a means that is properly forgotten once the end has been reached, as the scaffolds of construction workers are removed and forgotten once the building on which they are working is finished. That all said, however, this passage nonetheless seems potentially misleading or misguided in so far as it suggests that a contribution to political debate cannot rise to the level of public action if it is an attempt to win an argument by someone who is “for and against” other people, including fellow citizens. In the run up to the second Iraq War strong positions were taken by people on both sides of the issue who saw those opposed to them very much as enemies to be defeated. Does this imply that what those people said was “mere talk” and not genuine political speech? I don’t think so. Even when what was said sank to the level of lies and propaganda the speech still revealed the speaker, and exposed him or her to judgments made against the standard of the glorious and the inglorious. In a 2003 Address to the 103rd National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, for instance, Dick Cheney claimed, “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us.” This has since been revealed as a knowing falsehood, an attempt to “dazzle his audience” – us – “with propaganda”. But it does not follow from this that Cheney did not reveal himself here, both in the sense of how the world opens itself up to him and in the sense of “answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done.” Quite to the contrary, he revealed himself all too well, as a dishonest man unable to measure up, as a citizen, to the demands of democratic deliberation over questions of war and peace, life and death. Sincerity may well be a virtue, but it is not a virtue necessary to those who would reveal themselves in their words and deeds.<sup>37</sup>

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37. Consider in this regard Arendt’s extremely critical discussion of the idea that hypocrisy is a major political vice. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 260–61.



Even if this is right, however, this is a hardly a crippling problem for Arendt, as her position on polemical speech can easily be disengaged from her broader theory of rhetoric. Similarly, it would be wrong to conclude that *all* discussion of political matters will involve the revelation of the public person speaking. One need only recall George Orwell's vivid description of "some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases – *bestial atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder.*" Regarding such a speaker, Orwell notes, "one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank spectacles which seem to have no eyes behind them."<sup>38</sup> As Orwell suggests, being present in one's speech and to those one addresses is at times a hard won achievement. Arendt reflects a central aspect of what it will entail in her account of opinion. To act thoughtfully in politics requires not just communicating the opinions of others, but developing and coming know one's own opinion; and, as we have seen, this is not always going to be an easy task, even for an accomplished professional politician. Being a *dummy* in Orwell's sense is, for instance, something very different than thoughtfully working with a speechwriter to draft a speech one will give in one's own name. The public person cannot be so divorced from the private self as to become a cipher: if it could, courage would no longer be the primary political virtue. Courage is called for not just to enter the public realm, but to do so in the awareness that one will be judged by the standard of greatness, a standard that in turn requires one to measure up to political realities that in our time are staggering in their complexity and, oftentimes, their horror. Seen from this Arendtian perspective, the rhetorical aspect of political life is quite the opposite of what one would expect: instead of superficiality and irresponsibility, one finds the weight of a responsibility to the world and to the others with whom one shares it, a responsibility that must be borne almost entirely by one's words alone. When one recalls Arendt's suggestion that political speech at its best illuminates historical time by giving meaning to it, it is little wonder that she feared for its demise.<sup>39</sup>

38. G. Orwell, "Politics in the English Language", *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 152.

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