

Hannah Arendt on Freedom and Political Action



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Introduction

BEFORE freedom became a problem for philosophical thought, it was an element of everyday life in the Greek *agora*, the realm of politics and human affairs. It was on account of the fact that they were free that Greek freemen-citizens organized political organizations, engaged in concerted action with one another, and sought to establish a lasting world where the memory of their words and deeds could be kept for generations to come. With the emergence of “freedom” as a philosophical problem, however, came its identification with the twin objectives of *escape* from the effects of external coercion and of *flight* into some sort of an inward space where a person need come to terms only with himself. Hannah Arendt argues that such an understanding of freedom is a distortion of its original meaning and deflects attention from its privileged locus, the public realm.

“Inner freedom”

We are no strangers to what Arendt describes as the tension “between our consciousness and conscience, telling us that we are free and hence responsible, and our everyday experience in the outer world, in which we orient ourselves according to the principle of causality” (BPF, 143).¹

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (NY: Penguin Books, 1977), 143. (Henceforth, all references to this text will be abbreviated BPF.)

It arises whenever we are confronted with the fact that some decision we have made concerning a practical or political matter was the outcome of innumerable factors other than our own autonomous will. Arendt sums up the matter in this way:

In all practical and especially in political matters we hold human freedom to be a self-evident truth, and it is upon this axiomatic assumption that laws are laid down in human communities, that decisions are taken, that judgments are passed. In all fields of scientific and theoretical endeavor, on the contrary, we proceed according to the no less-evident truth of *nihil ex nihilo*, of *nihil sine causa*, that is, on the assumption that even our own lives are, in the last analysis, subject to causation and that if there should be an ultimately free ego in ourselves, it certainly never makes its unequivocal appearance in the phenomenal world, and therefore can never become the subject of theoretical ascertainment. (BPF, 143–44)

It is at this juncture that philosophy, particularly through the work of one of its most influential representatives, Immanuel Kant, proposes that we take freedom's existence to be a matter, not of empirical investigation, but of rational faith. To be able to do this, Kant had, of course, to bring up his celebrated distinction between "pure" or theoretical reason and "practical" reason. Whereas pure reason is programmed, so to speak, to uncover or bring to surface "the causal principle" which "rules" the "outer," phenomenal, world, practical reason "never [even] appears in the phenomenal world," being preeminently a matter of "inner motivation." Precisely because the operations of practical reason remain unencumbered by the kinds of laws that theoretical reason discovers in nature and judges to be "necessary," it constitutes, for Kant, the locus of freedom (BPF, 144–45). Kant writes:

Practical freedom presupposes that although something has not happened, it ought to have happened, and that its cause, [as found] in the [field of] appearance, is not, therefore, so determining that it excludes a causality of our will—a causality which, independently of those natural causes, and even contrary to their force and influence, can produce something that is determined in the time-order in accordance with empirical laws, and which can therefore begin a series of events entirely of itself.²

2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (NY:

In Arendt's view, however, if freedom refers to nothing but an inner feeling, or if it is empty of some manifestation in the world that lies between people, then it is politically irrelevant (BPF, 146). For as alluring as the notion of "inner freedom" may be, it brings about a demonstrable loss. "What is lost," Arendt tells us, "is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men."³ What lies in back of her remark, of course, is her high valuation of classical antiquity's understanding of freedom as involving a common public space (called the *agora*) where, not one man, but a multitude and plurality of men can rise to the fullest stature of their humanity by gathering and becoming related to one another through the twofold activity of word and deed.

Identification of freedom with liberation

We are similarly quick to posit an equivalence between freedom, on the one hand, and "liberation" from material necessity and the tyranny of despots, on the other. For while we live as part of nature and are determined, to that extent, by natural forces, we operate at the same time apart from nature, creating objects and acting in ways nature never intended. It is, therefore, not hard to understand why we should conclude that to the extent that we are subject to natural necessities, we are unfree, but that to the extent that we build upon nature and stretch ourselves beyond the reach of the natural, we are free.⁴ A problem develops, however, when politics is subsumed under this vision of freedom and reduced into a bureaucracy that will work to "liberate" citizens from necessity. Arendt does not deny that "liberation," so understood, is an important part of freedom. In the Greek *polis* itself, only freemen-citizens who possessed slaves, and who, therefore, did not have to worry about the material needs of their households, had time for the *agora*. Liberation was, in that sense, required for the political practice of freedom. The point Arendt wishes to stress, however, is that such liberation is not yet freedom. Neither does it automatically lead to freedom

St. Martin's Press, 1965), 465.

3. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1968), 4–5. (Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated MDT.)

4. Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (London: Dent, 1974), 74.

(BPF, 148; OR, 29–30).⁵ Margaret Canovan astutely captures Arendt's mind on the matter:

The citizen who sits at home, watching his slaves work for him (or drawing income from his investments) is liberated to some extent from nature's determination, but he is not free, for he is not exercising his potential freedom. Where he and others are kept at home by the fear of a tyrant who has substituted his own rule for the public realm, then liberation from the force of the tyrant (which metaphorically resembles the force of nature) is also necessary before freedom can be enjoyed. But, again, mere liberation, the mere banishing of the tyrant, is only a condition for freedom; freedom itself does not exist until the citizens are acting together, starting new things and making a name for themselves.⁶

Arendt insists, quite rightly I think, that liberation is not the same thing as freedom because, first of all, to define freedom exclusively in terms of liberation is to imply that freedom is something negative, that it is liberation *from* something, say a coerced position of passivity and submission, when, quite the contrary, it is something quite positive —“the positive achievement of . . . a public space . . . in which individuals debate together and participate with each other in determining public affairs.”⁷ Secondly, to identify freedom with liberation is to draw an equivalence between freedom and the set of civil liberties that people who live in a “free country” presumably enjoy. While such liberties may be prerequisites for freedom, they do not add up to freedom, and have no power, really, to give anyone a genuine taste of freedom. Besides, argues Arendt, if freedom is the same thing as liberation, how does one explain the historical time lag between the liberation from an old order and its replacement by a new order, a *novus ordo saeculorum*? All the foundation legends of Western civilization, she points out, advert to the existence of such a time lag, which they call the “hiatus between disaster and salvation.” The biblical story of the exodus of the Israeli tribes from Egypt, for instance, refers to the fact that “exodus” did not auto-

5. BPF, 148; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 29–30 (hereafter referred to as OR).

6. Canovan, *Political Thought*, 74.

7. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 209–10.

matically result in the conquest of a new “promised land”; that between the flight from oppression and slavery and the settlement of the people of Israel in the “promised land” came the protracted period of Israel’s wandering in the desert. Such a period of wandering, which in Arendt’s view, is a time when “the deeds of great leaders, persons of world-historic significance” can appear as stories to be remembered and recounted again and again,⁸ necessarily precedes the foundation of a *novus ordo saeculorum*, or a “new order of the ages.” Regarding the *novus ordo saeculorum* itself, there never really is a ready-made version of it waiting in the wings, poised to jump in on the heels of the old order’s exit from center stage. There necessarily follows a transition period, an intermission, as it were, during which human players simply do the best they can to provide the foundations for a new time and space for freedom. Most, if not all, contemporary examples of liberation movements reflect this transition period between the end of the old order and the beginning of a “new order of the ages.” So while the Philippine “People Power Revolution” of 1986 incarnated the hopes of a nation for a new era of liberation from tyranny and oppression, it did not, simply by taking place, usher in a new political order of freedom for everyone. To be sure, it unseated a dictator-tyrant, put a new constitution in place, and established all sorts of new democratic spaces. It did not, however, succeed in stamping out corruption in government (which became as rampant as it ever was), or in preventing public personages from reverting to their old habits of caring for nothing beyond their own interests. The nonviolent uprising and its aftermath were at best an example of how between disaster and salvation, between a “no-more” and a “not-yet,” there exists a temporal hiatus which Arendt terms, appropriately, the “abyss of freedom.” It is only by taking the abyss seriously that we awaken to the realization “that freedom is not the automatic result of liberation, that the end of the old is not necessarily the beginning of the new” (LOM, II, 204). The easy identification of freedom with liberation is a way of not taking this “abyss of freedom” seriously. It is a way of promoting the illusion that freedom is a once-and-for-all accomplishment. Freedom is never won so simply. What is more, it requires a citizenry’s active participation in public affairs at all times.

8. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 204. (Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated LOM.)

Arendt's conception of freedom

Freedom, so far, has been described in terms of what it is not. It is not an inner sanctum within an individual, buried in one's thought or will, to which one can flee in order to be independent of what goes on in the world of human affairs; neither can it be identified with the liberation from necessity and from the oppressive rule of tyrants and despots.⁹

But what is freedom, and, more particularly, what is it that makes an activity free? In her essay "What is Freedom?," Arendt categorically asserts that for action to be free, it must be free from "motive." Arendt does not explain exactly what she means by "motive," though it does seem that the term connotes for her some private thing that an actor harbors within himself prior to acting, such as need, desire, or commitment. It is, therefore, conceivable that a personal commitment to secure justice for all will influence a political activist's decision to join a protest movement against a dictatorial government. But insofar as this motive remains personal, it cannot be regarded as a content of freedom. Motives are notoriously private, whereas anything connected to freedom must be amenable to being made manifest. Besides, are preexistent: they prefigure decisions. Freedom, on the other hand, implies calling "something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known" (BPF, 151).

What is more, in Arendt's view, action that is free cannot be oriented toward a predictable end. In this sense, free "action" must be distinguished from goal or "work," insofar as work is always directed toward

9. To incite among her readers a sense of what freedom is, she adverts to its operation in classical antiquity, where it was a fact of everyday life, and implied, among other things, the emergence of citizens out of their private enclosures, and their collaboration on the coconstitution of a politically organized space for argumentation, debate, decision-making, and action-taking. Of course, not every form of human intercourse and not every kind of community (for the Greeks) was characterized by freedom," only those in which freedom could be transformed into an activity, or made into a demonstrable fact.

Thus, while an organized community of some kind might exist in a factory, affording workers a chance to interact with one another and even to become friends, it would still not be a community "characterized by freedom" if what motivates its constitution is less some kind of a collective a desire for self-engagement in speech and political action within a public space and more a concern to oversee and secure the satisfaction of their material needs (cf. BPF, 148-49).

some goal or end external to the activity itself. Work is “unfree” insofar as it is directed by and is subservient to its goal.¹⁰ There is, as such, a certain predictability built into it. Free “action,” on the other hand, is characterized by its unpredictability.

To be sure, when Arendt asserts that “action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other” (BPF, 151), she is by no means suggesting that a free act must never be motivated, or that it must have no goal. All she is saying is, as much as motives and goals are “determining factors” in every single act, the act itself remains capable of transcending them (BPF, 151). So while motives and aims figure in action, they are not the same thing as action. Arendt is relentless in her effort to purge free action from any kind of determination: from external determination, by denying that a free act is headed toward a predictable end; from inner determination, by denying that either the intellect, or will, or both, form the matter of a free act.¹¹

Besides asserting that a free act transcends motives and goals, Arendt asserts that it interrupts automatic processes, both natural and historical. When Arendt speaks of automatic processes, she means processes that, left on their own, move steadily like a force from point to point. There is, for instance, the natural life process “that drives our organism and which in its own terms, that is, biologically, leads from being to non-being, from birth to death” (BPF, 168). There is also the human-made, but no less automatic, historical process such as one encounters in “cases

10. Charles Taylor observes: “When we say that an event occurs for the sake of an end, we are saying that it occurs because it is the type of event which brings about this end. This means that the condition of the event’s occurring is that a state of affairs obtain such that it will bring about the end in question, or such that this event is required to bring about the end.” (*The Explanation of Behavior* [New York: Humanities Press, 1964], 9).

11. Arendt is opposed to such theories of human behavior as the “nurture theory” suggested by B. F. Skinner. Skinner asserts that in view of the external circumstances that affect human behavior, we should just forget about freedom and buckle down to the task of controlling human behavior in the only way it can be controlled, through “operant conditioning.” Thus he speaks of the systematic use of positive and negative “reinforcements” for bringing about behavior we like and discouraging all other types of behavior. (See Skinner’s *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* [NY: Bantam-Vintage Books, 1972].) We might note that if human action is defined exclusively in terms of Skinner’s theory, there really would be no room for spontaneity, unpredictability, and novel beginnings. There would be no breathing space for freedom in Arendt’s sense.

of petrified and hopelessly declining civilizations where doom seems foreordained, like a biological necessity, and since such historical processes of stagnation can last and creep on for centuries, they even occupy by far the largest space in recorded history; the periods of being free have always been relatively short in the history of mankind" (BPF, 168–69). Such automatic processes are among the "givens" of human existence. Human life is surrounded by them: our political life itself gets played out within such processes. They are not, however, just suffered by us. We do not simply submit ourselves to them. From a point within these processes, we can, through action, assert ourselves against them. That is what it means to act freely. It is to perform the "miracle" of breaking the momentum of a process that otherwise would go on and on. It is to engineer some sort of an opening up to the category of the wholly unexpected. In her book *On Revolution*, Arendt discusses automatic processes in the context of her analysis of the French Revolution. What originally had been an astronomical term, "revolution," connoting the lawfulness of a rotating, cyclical movement, in the aftermath of its appropriation by the leaders of this historical event became a political term connoting the irresistibility, irrevocability, and uncontrollability of a movement "beyond human power to arrest . . . and hence, a law . . . unto itself" (OR, 48). Arendt writes:

The notion of an irresistible movement, which the nineteenth century soon was to conceptualize into the idea of historical necessity, echoes from beginning to end through the pages of the French Revolution. Suddenly an entirely new imagery begins to cluster around the old metaphor and an entirely new vocabulary is introduced into political language. When we think of revolution, we almost automatically still think in terms of this imagery . . . on whose rushing waves the actors of the revolution were borne and carried away until its undertow sucked them from the surface and they perished together with their foes. (OR, 48)

To view the French revolution, as it were, from the outside, is to invite speculation that few, if any, of its principal agents were in control of the course of its events, or, if you will, that nothing came to pass that could be called the outcome of willful aims and purposes. Acts, words, events tied to the revolution begin to be seen "not in terms of the actor and the agent, but from the standpoint of the spectator who watches

the spectacle." It then appears that "only the spectator, and not the agent, can hope to understand what actually happened in any given chain of deeds and events" (OR, 52). In that backward glance of the spectator, historical "events" appear determined, frozen "in terms of historical necessity" (OR, 56). What is forgotten is the fact that, having occurred, an event, on closer inspection, invites the conclusion that it might just as well not have occurred. But, of course, enticed as we are by the spell of historical necessity, we model our course of action upon "events" such as revolutions rather than upon the plurality of actors that underwrite revolutions. We fall under the spell of "history and not action." We acquire "the skill to play whatever part the great drama of history [is] going to assign" us (OR, 58). Consequently, we surrender our capacity to act freely, that is, to burst through both natural and man-made processes in the effort to arrest them, to initiate new things.

But if free action is dictated neither by motive nor by goal, if it is not the outcome of necessity and historical processes, whence does it spring? Arendt answers that the free act is governed by "principles." Unlike motives that move a person from within, principles inspire a person from without. What is more, they do not, in their generality, prescribe particular goals. The generality of the principles by which we act freely is the one important mark that distinguishes them from motives and goals. Motives may be determining factors in every action, but once the goal for which we are motivated is achieved, the motives themselves are terminated. For instance, a person has her eyes on a college education because a higher education is required to land her a job later on. To achieve this goal, she must study hard and keep long nights. She is motivated to study by this desire of hers to be employed after graduation. However, once she has graduated and found a job, the motivation to study disappears. In fact, the goal to graduate and land a job terminate as well. But not so with principles. The principles that inspire action are never drained of their vitality even after the execution of the act. "In distinction from its goal, the principle of an action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular person or to any particular group" (BPF, 152).

Another characteristic of the principles by which we act freely is that they become manifest only as we act. In the absence of political actors to embody them in the public realm, they do not matter to human

affairs. For these principles to have any reality, they have to be incarnated and particularized in the public realm. Arendt gives as examples of such principles honor or glory, love of equality, distinction, excellence. Honor, for instance, is not a commodity which we can acquire, or possess, or show off as we might a medal of honor. It becomes concrete and manifest only in our actual dealings with our peers. The most we do is *act* honorably. Similarly, freedom cannot make its appearance in our world, unless it is through the incarnation in action of principles (BPF, 152–53).

To further highlight the tight unity that exists among action, freedom, and the principles by which we act, Arendt suggests thinking about them in terms of “virtuosity,” a sort of excellence signaling something that a person does. Virtuosity, for Arendt, necessarily relates to action, manifesting itself through the performance of the act itself. There always is, in genuine political action, an element of virtuosity. For, as with the performing arts, action is “assessed neither as an innate quality or intention of the actor, nor by the consequences of his deeds—only by the performance, by how he appeared while he was doing” (LOM, I, 131; BPF, 153), by the excellence or virtuosity of the effort to begin something new.¹²

Arendt’s term for the condition that permits such initiative-taking is “natality.” She explains how natality relates to freedom in a discussion of the ancient Greek (*archein*, which meant “to begin,” “to lead,” and, finally, “to rule,” and *prattein*, which meant “to carry something through”) and Roman (*agere*, which meant “to set something in motion,” and *gerere*, which meant “to endure” or “to support the continuation of past acts”) verbs for “to act.” Clearly, for the Greeks, the prerogative of beginning something new in the world through action belonged to those who, because they no longer needed to concern themselves with the basic necessities of life, were “free” to move about the public realm alongside of their peers. Even so, the free citizen of the *polis* had to enlist the help of others, “for only with the help of others could . . . the ruler, beginner and leader, really act, . . . carry through

12. Arendt also discusses the element of “beginning” as related to freedom in the context of revolutions. In her mind, revolutions are meant to establish the foundations of freedom. As establishing such foundations, revolutions are already marked by the beginning of something new. They also establish a human world where, in freedom, citizens can insert themselves as beginners for the sake of the world itself.

whatever he had started to do" (BPF, 166). Similarly, for the Romans, freedom consisted in a beginning "bequeathed by the founders of Rome to the Roman people," and in the augmentation of this beginning by subsequent acts of freedom that also preserved the initial act (BPF, 166). That is to say, it consisted of a "beginning" by which something new was brought into the world, but because such a "beginning" had to be sustained and followed through with subsequent acts, it had to consist as well of acts that "continued" or "augmented" that which had been begun. Yet another source for Arendt's discussion of the connection between natality and freedom is Augustine's assertion in *De Civitate Dei* that human beings do not so much possess freedom (*liberum arbitrium*) as bring it with them into the world by the fact of their birth. In other words, human beings are born not just to be free, but to bring freedom into being in the world. They come into the world not just to be acted upon by what precedes them—others, circumstances, situations—but to act upon the world in virtue of their "character" as beginners (BPF, 167; LOM, II, 108–9). For Arendt, then, freedom empowers us and gives us the chance to take initiatives, to begin something new in the world. As long as there are human beings, there will always be openings to change and renewal because human beings not only incarnate the capacity to begin; they are in their very persons that beginning itself. Arendt writes:

If the creation of (human beings) coincides with the creation of a beginning in the universe (and what else does this mean but the creation of freedom?), then the birth of individual (human beings), being new beginnings, re-affirms the original character of [human beings] in such a way that origin can never become entirely a thing of the past; while, on the other hand, the very fact of the memorable continuity of these beginnings in the sequence of generations guarantees a history which can never end because it is the history of beings whose essence is beginning.¹³

13. Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Partisan Review* 20, no. 4 (July–August 1953): 392.

Some critical evaluations

George Kateb, in his book *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, remarks:

One of Hannah Arendt's great powers is the ability to refresh perception. She tries to get us to look again at subjects on which there already exists perhaps too much writing and therefore too much confident understanding. By her further reflection, she tries to save these subjects for our further reflection. Her re-discovery is actually discovery. The reader experiences a shock not of recognition, but of revelation.¹⁴

Perhaps in no other context is Kateb's remark more appropriate than in Arendt's discussion of freedom. Arendt is not happy with the way tradition has relegated the issue of freedom to something belonging to the inner self—that is, to thought or will. Beginning with her insistence upon the significance of human affairs and the public realm to human existence, Arendt powerfully argues her point that action and the web of relationships that humans establish with their peers is the manifest locus of freedom. It is by grounding her notion of freedom in the web of human affairs that she can argue that there can be no freedom unless it is manifested in action in the public realm, and conversely, that for action to be free, it must be “contentless,” transcending motives, goals, and other “determining” factors, and incarnating “principles” such as honor and glory, love of equality, distinction, by performing them.¹⁵

It could be objected, of course, that Arendt's claim that a free action is “contentless” leaves us without any standards by which to judge the world of human affairs. The response to the objection would be that

14. George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 188.

15. This is an aspect of Arendt's notion of freedom that I accept, though with some reservations. I understand, of course, that her claim that an action, to be free, must be free from motives on the one hand and goals or predictable ends on the other, is not a claim that it must be shorn of *all* motives and goals. All she is saying is that a free act cannot be defined in terms of motives and goals alone. Still, I find it difficult to imagine that a genuinely free action would not include motives and goals as a major part of its content. After all, we appear to ourselves as beings who act on the basis of intentions and motives, and it appears to us that people who act in the public realm act for

particular reasons. People act upon the stage of politics for religious or moral reasons; out of a sense of kinship with others; out of a desire to oppose corruption in government or the despotism of tyrants. One nun, reflecting on her participation in the Filipino People Power Revolution of 1986, wrote: "After almost twenty years of silence and apathy, we finally found our voice as a people, and as we prayed, spoke, and acted together as a people, God was suddenly felt to be one with His people" (as quoted in *God With Us: The 1986 Philippine Revolution*, ed. Alfeo G. Nudás [Quezon City: Cardinal Bea Institute, 1986], 70).

She was just one among so many who felt that acting was called for because it was God's will for his poor, oppressed, and helpless people. Indeed, at the time, Filipino bishops themselves outlined a motive for acting:

According to moral principles, a government that assumes or retains power through fraudulent means has no moral basis. For such an access to power is tantamount to a forcible seizure and cannot command the allegiance of the citizenry.

We are not going to effect the change we seek by doing nothing, by sheer apathy. If we did nothing we would be party to our own destruction as a people. We would be jointly guilty with the perpetrators of the wrong we want righted.

The way indicated to us now is the way of nonviolent struggle for justice. (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Post Election Statement," as reported in *The Philippines Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen Roskamm Shalom [Boston: South End Press, 1987], 350–52)

Expressing to his family his reasons for defecting to the revolutionists, a soldier wrote:

I have joined a movement that intends to restore pride, self-respect, and democracy to the Filipino. . . . The initial phase of this movement will demand everything a [person] has to offer—and I have volunteered for it. I do not do this out of adventurism or recklessness. I really feel that it is my sworn duty—my destiny—to share in a glorious and honorable moment like this. . . . Everything else that I have been, all that I have done, is focused on this single moment. (As reported in *An Eyewitness History: People Power, The Philippine Revolution of 1986*, ed. Monina Allarey Mercado [Manila: The James B. Reuter, SJ Foundation, 1986], 133.)

It ought to be clear from the examples brought up above that whatever their motives and goals, many Filipinos who acted in 1986 acted not out of self-serving or self-interested motives. They acted, rather, on the basis of what they understood to be the good of the people and of the public realm. Arendt appears to be unable to appreciate this point when she insists that motives and goals have a way of insinuating "self-interest" into what otherwise would be a "disinterested" action. The problem with Arendt's position, as I see it, is that it defines motives and goals too narrowly, as necessarily self-interested, when, in fact, it is possible to cite instance after instance of individuals acting on the basis of motives and goals that clearly transcend self-interest and self-promotion in favor of the good of the political community. It is not that I think Arendt is mistaken, only that she is not entirely right either. A free act, by all means, should be "disinterested," in the sense of being neither self-promoting nor self-serving. What I would like to argue, however, is that certain motives for acting—such as a desire to establish political equality, the passion for excellence—can be just as "disinterested" as acting for the sake of acting itself.

action, for Arendt, is inspired by “principles” that provide it with meaning and serve as its norms. What is more, action is ultimately judged according to the extent to which it is “linked with the idea of the importance (indeed the indispensability) for freedom and action of the existence of a political realm.”¹⁶ Thus, if the president of a country wracked by ideological armed conflicts proposes to maintain political stability by stifling legitimate opposing voices, either by turning an indifferent ear to them or by relegating them to a carceral existence, he would not be acting freely. But neither would opposition groups that resort to armed violence and terrorism. The public realm as a space of freedom is never served by silencing legitimate opposing voices. The greater this sort of violence, the more resolutely the public realm evaporates. Violence causes people to become distrustful of the laws and institutions, as well as the modes of interaction, that are necessary for the creation of the space of freedom. Arendt writes:

Terror . . . substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions. To abolish the fences of laws between men . . . means to take away man’s liberties and destroy freedom as a living political reality; for the space between men as it is hedged in by laws, is the living space of freedom.¹⁷

Arendt’s description of freedom vigorously displays her confidence in human agency. Her hope for us and our world is as great and as renewable as our capacity to begin new things in it. The oft-quoted phrase “Hope springs eternal” rings more meaningfully to us when we realize that the hope we have is really bound to our freedom, to our ability to renew the face of the world and make it a better, more just, and more hospitable place for the plurality of men to dwell in. But this hope in freedom is not some abstract “land of milk and honey.” In fact, it is wasted when its only abode is the ivory tower of the mind. A person is not free who merely thinks or believes that he is; he makes himself free by exchanging the security of his private domain for the tense

16. Scott E. Edwards, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt: A Study in Thought and Action* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1964), 163.

17. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951), 465–66.

unpredictability of the public realm (BPF, 156). Freedom, in that sense, has to be cognate with action.

With a view to Arendt's emphasis on action and the public realm as the locus of freedom, a question comes up: Is freedom possible only in action? Does freedom exist only in the public realm? Arendt, as is well known, applies strict standards to what can be properly designated as a "free" action. Be that as it may, Arendt is willing to admit that freedom is not confined to the public realm. She says, for instance, that freedom, understood as the sheer capacity to begin, "animates and inspires all human activities and is the hidden source of production of all great and beautiful things" (BPF, 169). Thus, the farmer who innovates his crops through the changing seasons so as to ensure a more productive harvest is exercising his freedom. The fabulist who allows human thoughts and ideals to "speak" through animals in order to instill a lesson or two in children is also acting freely. Simply put, there is freedom as well in the "little" things we do. Arendt, however, is less concerned with the "free" in the "little" and the "hidden" than in a freedom which can be demonstrated. For while freedom dwells in everyone's heart "as desire or will or hope or yearning . . . the human heart . . . is a very dark place, and whatever goes on in its obscurity can hardly be called a demonstrable fact" (BPF, 149). Freedom, for Arendt, "develops fully only when it is not hidden but appears . . . in a worldly space."¹⁸ ~

18. George Kateb, "Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 5 (May 1977): 148.