Reciprocity in the making of politics: An appreciation of Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*

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*Abstract* In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt upholds a deliberate critique of the man-made artificial world against the natural conditions in which life is given. She conceived this artificial space as something that men share with each other and communicate in. All the designated activities pertaining to her notion of *Vita Active*, namely labor, work, and action correspond to such a common space. Among all the other constituents of the common world and its affairs, it is perhaps the construct of human plurality that Arendt held with utmost importance. For Arendt, such a condition of intersubjective affiliation is fundamental to the founding of any enfranchised body politic and can be perceived only via the medium of speech and action. Nevertheless, her notion of political action is largely debated and has remained equally controversial. This paper, therefore, would attempt to examine the tenets of this notion of plurality in constituting and simultaneously shaping the essential conditions of human existence, namely action, freedom, and a political way of life. Furthermore, by means of literary methodologies. Content analysis, and Textual analysis, this study intends to selectively analyze the significance of intersubjective recognition and reciprocity as the primary constituents of the phenomenological interpretation of action.

*Keywords*: action, freedom, politics, intersubjective recognition, public space

1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt is undeniably one of the most celebrated writers of twentieth-century political philosophy. While she remained an ardent critic of totalitarian state architecture throughout her life, at the heart of her political understanding, ideas such as active citizenship, political freedom, authoritative state repression, and the indispensability of intersubjective recognition in constituting a body politic remained.

In her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt reflects upon totalitarian regimes as a novel form of political ruling system that asserts its legitimacy by means of strategically dictated terror, which, according to Arendt, betrays any cognizable historical precedence. Villa (2016) in the *Introduction: The development of Arendt’s political thought* rightly observes: “Terror, then, was not a means for totalitarian regimes but, in Arendt’s view, their very essence” (p. 2). She argues that, for Arendt, such ideologically dictated regimens predominantly ruled by the use of state machinery-induced violence or the “use of terror” (Villa, 2016, p. 2). Moreover, the mechanisms employed by the totalitarian administrations were not just another considerable deviation from the conventional workings of the nation-states but rather an advertent maneuver to rule and dictate by implementing an order of terror, i.e., an unprecedented manifestation of implementing “evil as policy” (Villa, 2016, p. 2).

Arendt observes that such a system diverges significantly from the conventional notions of tyranny because it operates on a more refined, centrally ruled, and doctrine-based sociopolitical system. Instruments of coercion and repression are often used to gain absolute control over all aspects of an individual’s life. Furthermore, it becomes evident from Arendt’s reading that the workings of totalitarian regimes are primarily founded upon the conditions of strict obedience to an existing ideology and mass radicalization rather than any isolated form of authoritarian discourse. Baehr (2010), in congruence with Arendt, identifies that the affairs of totalitarian governance are fundamentally regulated by “an ideological ‘supersense’” (p. 47), an aberrant notion of social and interpersonal relationships that is innately spurious and superficially maintained, therefore, stands diametrically opposite to any plausible idea of sound governance or even political rationality. He further notes that, according to Arendt, such “omnipotent” (Baehr, 2010, p. 46) totalitarian structures were purposively devised to annihilate the unique properties of an individual persona and replace it with the condition of “primal equality [an ontological possibility that reduces individuals to a state of having no significant differences to identify with.]” (Baehr, 2010, pp. 46-47).

Works such as *The Human Condition* (1958), *Between Past and Future* (1961), *On Revolution* (1963), and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) established Arendt as a distinguished critic of historical and contemporary body politics. Her consistent advocacy for classical values and ideals concerning citizenship, human rights, freedom, and political action remains pivotal to...
the founding constructs of contemporary democracy. She was equally a fervent propagator of the importance of both speech and action in constituting and conserving human rights within a functional democracy.

In *The Human Condition and Between Past and Future*, Arendt upholds a deliberate critique of active human life or *vital activities* and proposes the notion of action as the highest manifestation of all cognizable human activities. Action, notes Arendt, is essentially perceived in its innate tendency for revelation and remains rooted in the very condition of human natality, whereas notions such as freedom and human plurality remain fundamental to its founding constructs. Knauer (1980) identifies the association of three major factors that primarily influences Arendt’s notion of action. These factors include active testimony and the expression of worldly principles, the transvaluation of the actor as the subject, and, last, the acquisition of meaning that unfolds while these principles are actualized through action. He concludes, “[Strictly speaking, action is not merely some occurrence in the physical world, some behavioral event; it is its meaning” (Knauer, 1980, p. 724).

Furthermore, Arendt’s idea of political action is often regarded as nonlinear and unconventional, maintaining a potentially radical niche to effectuate new beginnings in pursuit of the extraordinary. In this regard, action is perhaps the only force entitled to humans that directly corresponds to the idea of revolutionary advent and embodies less continuity than rupture within a preexisting sociopolitical structure. In her critique of Arendt, Lucy Cane (2015) observes, “It is partly this characterization of action as highly novel that makes Arendt’s vision of political freedom so compelling” (p.57). However, she further mentions that Arendt has often been sternly criticized for her notion of politics being “insufficiently attuned to goal-directed or purposive endeavors” (Cane, 2015, p. 59) instead of acting in furtherance of holistic interests.

This paper aims to study the significance of constructs such as human plurality and intersubjective recognition in shaping Hannah Arendt’s understanding of action. It is well known that Arendt envisaged the activity action to be located entirely within the domains of reciprocal human associations, and the condition of objective interchange of opinions remained pivotal to her understanding of an active political life. Moreover, she ideated the construct of freedom as an elemental corollary of action and argued that action must always be sourced from and through the constructs of political enfranchisement. Therefore, it remains imperative to examine the diverse array of intersecting archetypes that establish and accentuate reciprocal relationships in the enactment of political action.

Baehr (2010), in *Hannah Arendt’s Indictment of Social Science*, argues against Arendt’s critique of Totalitarian regimes concerning the popular adulation of the Nazi administration on instating concentration camps. He finds that Arendt held these camps as the furthest sublation and monumental aversion of any form of political instantiation. These camps, for Arendt, were institutionally mediated bodies functioning under systematized constructs to impel individuals out of their unrestrained and spontaneous quintessence, recasting into one uniform species with little to no phenomenological discernibility (Baehr, 2010). Baehr (2010) argues that this debasement of man “into an artificial, isolated, and interchangeable creature” (p. 21) is perhaps the predominant indicator of a sustained loss of authenticity and ontological significance that one political arena endorses. It can be argued that a systematic diminution of inclusive interpersonal relationships was exercised in these camps through a curated negation of both plurality and heterogeneity. Eventually, this enforced reduction in inclusivity further contributed to what Baehr (2010) calls the “metamorphosing of…captives” (pp. 46-47). Herein, he alludes to a form of ontological decadence concerning human existence that essentially devalues the fundamental clauses of human plurality to mere animality. A state of perennial devolution marked by sheer depravity and loss of human nature, dialogue, and rationale. Arendt viewed the functional properties of these camps as the fundamental embodiment of what she perceived as anti-political: one institutionalized deterrent to all the verities of human freedom, a testament to her searing indictment of an aberrant form of ontological corporeality deeply rooted in exclusionary beliefs.

Moreover, Arendt (1998) frequently counterposed the ideological position of totalitarian bodies against constructs such as human plurality and political freedom because she envisaged the act of freethinking and cogitation as an ineluctably internal process that is primarily conditioned by and stems from the mutual exchange of opinions and sentiments. Freedom, in a strictly Arendtian sense, is largely predicated on the notion of pluralism and active public participation and, therefore, cannot be comprehended in complete isolation or solitude. Additionally, isolating oneself from one’s unique distinctiveness or persona is deemed to be equally detrimental to the very idea of an enfranchised body politic. Baehr (2010) observes that, for Arendt, ideologies and ideological constructs are chiefly grounded in unilateral and reductionist estimations of events surmised into postulation, which are then self-validated with flawed rationale or “antireasoning” (p. 75). As he points out, “Thinking is a two-in-one inner dialog, a duet between myself and others, real or imaginary. Ideologies are an onenote dirge” (Baehr, 2010, 74).

Steven Buckler (1996), in his work *Hannah Arendt: thinking for the sake of politics*, advocates for the primacy of a consistent and well-structured frame of reference in conserving a political core. In view of Arendt’s theory of political action, he concludes that political action, therefore, must prevail principally to foster and elongate its own continuance, as otherwise, action might lose its unique potential to effectuate new beginnings without relying on any preestablished point of reference. Buckler (1996) observes that this exploratory nature of political action is far more conditional upon things occurring phenomenally and contingently, as he writes: “[F]or Arendt, exploring and reaffirming an arena of human experience [is] grounded in appearance rather than essence and in opinion rather than rational truth” (p. 86). In other words, the essence of action, as ideated by Arendt, rests on the very act of performance, while the idea of politics is about revealing
oneself in relation to “the collective revelation of human plurality” (Buckler, 1996, 85), provided that they both correspond to one concrete public arena.

In line with Buckler’s observation, Philip Walsh (2011) also held it imperative to have the spaces of interpersonal recognition constantly reinforced so that the unflinching notion of freedom could prevail. He writes, “The web of human relationships is highly fragile, requires constant sustenance and is both created by and a precondition of, the human capacity for freedom” (Walsh, 2011, p. 128). For him, Arendt envisioned the absence of freedom as a likely perversion of both the mutually shared spaces and the potential for exchanging ideas between equals during their interaction in such domains. Arendt argued that this exclusion of freedom essentially contributes to a fundamental impasse in the course of intersubjective negotiations. In addition, Walsh (2011) reads Arendt’s impression of action as the sole template where the proprieties of freedom could be evenly actualized. Coinciding with the constituting properties that sustain political action, e.g., “boundlessness, irreversibility and unpredictability” (Walsh, 2011, 128), freedom here abides not only as a natural corollary of action but also equally as a hallmark intrinsic to its entirety.

In her article, *Hannah Arendt on the principles of political action* Lucy Cane (2015) exemplifies the paradigms of how Arendt envisioned action arising from the directives of principles. She states that Arendt held the idea of public freedom to be the fulcrum of all political affairs comprehensible. According to Cane (2015), although Arendt deliberately situated politics outside the peripheries and measures of achieving material ends, she also acknowledged that collective interests could become potentially political when driven by “worldly principle” (Cane, 2015, p. 60), such as solidarity. These principles, when pursued concertedly through performance, contour a form of conviction that eventually manifests into action and thereby remains one of the key determinants that distinguish action from “the purely means-end logic of work” (Cane, 2015, p. 61) and all day-to-day pursuits pertaining to mere conservation of life and being.

With reference to the ideas discussed above, this paper aims to further investigate the proposition that Arendt envisaged politics neither as a mere means to attain a unitary idea of good par excellence nor as a purveyor of material interests but rather as a tool that enables individuals to pursue excellence by breaking away from the mere and repetitive order of life and death. In her own words, “The raison d’être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action” (Arendt, 2006).

2. Materials and Methods

This write-up acknowledges the use of textual analysis as the primary methodology for conducting the body of the research.

3. Results and Discussion

The Human Condition was first published in 1958 and comprises six parts. In 1998, the second edition was introduced by the political theorist Margaret Canovan. One could state that *the human condition* entails a critical reflection of Arendt’s ontological considerations concerning human existence. Arendt’s argument primarily concerns the relative equations of engagement that the collective sum of human activities, also known as *vita activa*, entails. She refers to the fact that in ancient Greek civilizations, life was divided into two distinct realms, namely, public and private (Arendt, 1998). The public realm was considered the hallmark of freedom: an arena where interpersonal recognition is exchanged through action and speech and where individuals participate in all the activities that were not dictated or swayed by the mere biological necessities of life and daily sustenance. In contrast, the private realm connotes a secluded and subjective idea of the life process and its indispensability, mostly appertaining to the natural cycle of birth and death and the in-betweens. However, with the advent of the ‘modern age [seventeenth to twentieth century]’, Arendt (1998) notes that the rise of a third and novel form of the realms was observed. She (1998) calls this the social realm. Arendt argued that the social realm took the necessities of the private realm to the peripheries and interests of the public domain. By framing and endorsing biological necessities as matters of public concern, the social realm significantly attenuates the spectrum of free action (Arendt, 1998).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1998, p. 7) introduced the term *Vita activa* to delineate the three stages of active human life, namely, labor, work, and action. She identified the activity of labor as primarily abounding with all the biological essentials necessary for survival. However, with work, the stress is on building a relatively durable physical space, i.e., the world, by means of manufacturing and upholding human artifacts to combat and withstand the ephemeral nature of life. Out of all the activities, Arendt (1998) argues, only action possesses the potential to initiate beginnings that could lead to the phenomenological condition of human enfranchisement (pp. 7-8).

3.1. The World and Man: Acting in Plurality

Arendt puts her firm conviction in the possibility that human beings are more or less conditioned beings. The claim chiefly pertains to the various existential conditions human beings engage in while modifying the world in the process. An intricate course of interactive mediation, adaptations, and modifications phases and dictates the clauses of relationships between *homo faber* [a man who controls his environment by the use of tools] and its operant interactants (Arendt, 1998). In
the words of Arendt (1998), “Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition. The impact of the world’s reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force” (p. 9). Such a percept essentially alludes to a form of mutual correspondence between humans and the objects constituting the world—one that incessantly alters and modifies the reality of the other and fabricates one’s own during the act.

Moreover, when Arendt (1998) asserts that “men constantly create their own, homemade conditions” (p. 9), she reflects on the ineluctability of the proposition whereby man-made artifacts are constantly maneuvering and negotiating with human existence in its entirety. Here, the equivalence between the creator and his creations is intricately entwined. Every plausible interaction between humans and man-made contrivances in some fashion amends their reality and, therefore, remains indispensable to the holistic construct of the world. The world, hypothetically, is a sophisticated compilation of man-made things, fabrications, and architectures, wherein all human activities designated to vita activa attest to and undergo constant realignment. The entirety of human activities and the world share a mutual and equally reciprocal relationship, supplementing each other and forming a locus where action can manifest itself (Arendt, 1998, pp. 9-10).

Margaret Canovan (1995) observes that the man-made world enables humans to cultivate their own location in proportion to their entitlements within one artificial ensemble. She writes, “It [the shared world] creates space between individuals who do not exist naturally, and this existential space enables individuals to move about, take up different positions and see their common world from different points of view, giving them a grasp of reality that no one can achieve on his own” (Canovan, 1995, pp. 107-108). Here, this condition of plurality is not merely titular but has a performative function. It acts as a potential force, making the idea of polycentric spatiality, i.e., a spatial arrangement with multiple recognized centers, a visible reality.

Action, argues Arendt (1998), is one of the fundamental constituents of human plurality. It is a vital and emancipatory force entitled to and exercised by free men. It is action that largely preserves and distinguishes the durable reality of the common world from a mere animalistic mode of survival. Canovan (1995), in her appreciation of the Human Condition, rightly observes that “Since recognition in the public realm bestows dignity and significance on whatever appears in it, it is, for one thing, the arena in which the achievements of human civilization are appropriated by each generation and passed on to the next, in which human beings celebrate and cherish whatever they ‘want to save from the natural ruin of time’, and in which they continually ‘humanize’ the world by endlessly talking about it” (p. 111). These “achievements of human civilization” bestow meaning only where men act concertedly under the precondition of intersubjective exchange of recognition. In other words, the pursuit of excellence, according to Arendt (1998), emanates not in isolation but from the very deeds men constitute within the visibility of equals. Here, it can be argued that The Human Condition upholds Arendt’s advocacy for reciprocal recognition as a necessary precondition for action in contriving a durable and mutually shared arena, as she mentions action: “cannot even be imagined outside the society of men” (Arendt, 1998, p. 22). Patrick Hayden (2015) takes the argument further by stating that for Arendt, the common world cannot be perceived in isolation from the artifacts it houses and from the innumerable number of intersecting realities that are fundamentally ratified by a plurality of perspectives. Although the world, Hayden (2015, p. 754) observes, is invariably one mutually shared ontological space, its realities vary significantly depending on how the episodes of interpersonal experiences are articulated, interpreted, accommodated, and defined in relation to the worldly artifacts. These intersubjective modules of interactions thus collectively sustain the armature of action, making the latter a phenomenological possibility. Canovan (1995) makes a similar observation when she notes that the public arena closely corresponds to the disclosure of worldly reality in a manner that advocates for “sameness in utter diversity” (p. 113). She argues that for Arendt, any ontological experience of reality within the public arena could be sustained only under the precondition of human plurality. Whereas Hayden (2015) stressed primarily the manner of intersubjective exchange and its interpretations, Canovan (1995) viewed Arendt’s notion of public life as ineluctably entangled with the primacy of plurality itself. She further elucidates this idea of plurality as a unique phenomenological condition endowed with multipoint observation: an enabler of prospective encounters between varied perspectives that are appreciated by and in the presence of men.

Moreover, this condition of plurality remains equally determining for Arendt in her appreciation of matters concerning free politics. In her critique of The Human Condition, Canovan (1995) writes, “[T]he link between publicity and the disclosure of reality in its fullness must also be a link between reality and free politics” (p. 113). In this regard, political freedom is actualized whenever perspectives intersect and undergo maturation; therefore, worldly reality is publicized against illusion and vanity. She understood this “many-sidedness of reality” (Canovan, 1995, p. 113) as the political sui generis that has remained central to Arendt’s understanding of political action: an essential deterrent to the notions that Arendt held as antipolitical, e.g., delusional precepts of actuality and ideological monopolization (Canovan, 1995).

In addition, it would be erroneous to assume that only a notable multiplication of individual subjects could corroborate such a proposition of plurality. For Arendt, recognizing plurality involves perceiving and acknowledging a reality founded upon nonlinear and mutually nonconforming beliefs. Even if a single strain of observation is meticulously elongated and pursued by multiple subjects, quantified singularity in their pursuit still fails to qualify for the unabridged diversity offered by the public arena since “[I]t is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective” (Arendt, 1998, p. 58). For Arendt, the idea of one pluralistic space rests not in the enormity of numerical
significance but in the diversity of prospective outlooks. In this sense, Arendt’s conception of the public arena is irrefutably polycentric. It is never centrally operated; instead, it is always exerted reciprocally and is transposed and relocated wherever this relational position is challenged. Such an enduring construct is a quality particular to a space that equally relates and dissociates individuals through a concerted manner of appearance and ascribes significance to all the facets of human achievements as a corollary.

Furthermore, the possibility of having a myriad of perspectives encountering one another allows room for assimilation and dissension simultaneously without obliterating their essential differences. Although such appreciation of differences and dissent within a public arena is not limited only to Arendt’s understandings, this multifarious nature of worldly reality acts as a crucial constituent for preserving the “relative permanence” (Arendt 1998, p. 56) of the public arena against the ephemeral nature of life itself. Therefore, it could be argued that Arendt’s notion of the public arena is chiefly founded upon plurality of cognization wherein “the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects” (Arendt, 1995, p. 57) coincide.

3.2. Worldly Interests: Political Identity and the “In-betweens”

George Kateb (1997), in his essay *Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, observes that one’s political self, i.e., the formative disclosure of one’s identity in light of public representations, is the ideal and legitimate representation of one’s true identity. In his reading, Arendt has overtly emphasized the notability of being known and recognized by others as integral to one’s self-awareness, even more so than the much-celebrated human faculty of introspection (Kateb, 1997). Moreover, as this revelation is principally subject to mutability and a process of constant modulation, the quintessential meaning of the actor’s identity could be fully understood and comprehended only after death (Kateb, 1997). Kateb writes, “Political Action is the great definer and concentrator of the self, the great stimulus to the formation of a self out of its own wether. Political action introduces coherence into the self and its experience” (Kateb, 1997, 149). The public sphere, as the center of political excellence, derives its operability from the fact that it propagates a quality of coexistence characterized by modalities of cognition and awareness that are by nature corporeal, reciprocal, and posit perceptual diversity. The ‘I’ [actor] here conditionally owes his entire political significance to the discovery of the respective others, and in the process, he reveals himself sparingly. This revelation is necessarily found as an evolutionary process in which the actor undergoes multiple augmentations and transformations to achieve his potential political identity. That said, this transformation toward maturity is always construed in a manner of association rather than isolation. In the words of Kateb (1997), “I therefore cannot enter political action in order to know myself; I can only get to know myself somewhat better, and then thanks only to the political copresence of others” (p. 149).

Arendt (1998) envisaged the disclosure of one’s true self as fundamentally allied to constructs such as public deliberation, debate, articulateness and enunciation. She identified them collectively as speech. It is equally evident that she held the confluence of speech and action as a very much worldly thing, with its various physical locations where such interactions take place. As action and speech complement each other, the public arena gains political significance. In Kovacs’s (2012) reading of Arendt, “[a]ction without speech ends in violence and ceases to be real human action which creates and maintains the web of intersubjective plurality” (p. 96). Arguably, action and speech together instate a unique spatiotemporal position: a ubiquitous space that lies between people who relate, integrate and contain all worldly experiences. It encompasses everything that occurs between men and all the matters that individuals share locally and remotely, serving as a silent keeper of public interest. According to Hayden (2015), such a spatial construct is neither entirely physical nor abstract but rather emanates from an “intermediary third dimension” (p. 755) that lays bare between the equals. He finds it to be more of an ontological “precondition for interpersonal recognition” (Hayden, 2015, p.755) that is not limited to a dyadic exchange but rather enables the possibility of promoting political virtues through shared participation. In assent with Hayden’s argument, Canovan (1985) writes, “Public space in Arendt’s sense may be physical space officially marked out for public affairs...but it need not be” (p. 620). She concludes that for Arendt, any perceptible dimension in which matters that constitute the common world come to public relevance has the potential to be recognized as a public arena (Canovan, 1985).

The ambit of human relationships is often nonlinear and pliantly associated. Although its inherent intangibility defies any plausibility of having a definitive contour, this discernible position chiefly constitutes the room for multifarious, interpersonal, and reciprocal associations, i.e., the “in-between” (Arendt 1998, p. 183) that men partake in. Arendt (1998) calls this the “[w]eb of human relationships” (p. 183): a spatiotemporal reality marked by a shared understanding between individuals while “acting and speaking directly to one another” (p. 183). Hayden (2015) observes that while pursuing “intersubjective recognition” (p.752), it is imperative to acknowledge the possibility of attaining truth in disparate and varied forms. He further argues that, in contrast to the authorial notion of attesting truth in one absolute form, this acknowledgment is validated in the relational exchange of heterogeneous opinions among subjects who are mutually respected as equals (Hayden, 2015, 752). Hayden firmly believed that the consequent meaningfulness of the world and its affairs could be achieved only through collaborative action. This is because, unlike performance executed in isolation, cooperative action almost inherently attests to “a public, and paradigmatically political aspect of togetherness” (Hayden,
Moreover, his repeated insistence on the high prevalence of intersubjective relationality in the making of Arendt’s political arena is equally noteworthy.

3.3. Action, Freedom and the ‘Political’

Arendt (1998), in a sense, presumed action to be the “political activity par excellence” (p. 9) and closely associated with the idea of human natality (p. 9). The analogy here is rooted in the fact that as each new-born is entitled to the capacity to begin something new and reveal things previously unexplored, it thereby corresponds to the very revelatory potential action that is endowed with. Arendt primarily held action with certain constructs of productivity that are conducive to its innate potential to originate and remain boundless. These elements of productivity essentially make action rapturous and fluid as they navigate through milieus that are immeasurable and syncretic in appeal. Kovacs (2012) observes that, for Arendt, the highest state of human existence belongs to the realm of action: a niche fundamental to the articulateness and formulation of the public space, a stand that is intricately emancipatory compared to the activity of labor and work and equally peculiar to the idea of individual elocution and public discourse (96). Kovacs further argues that Arendt views the notion of action as intricately related to the construct of political freedom and that they share a mutually complementary relationship. Arendt (1998) firmly believed that the true manifestation of political freedom could be attained only through the media of active civic engagement and unconfined public deliberation. In her view, “[T]o act and to be free is the same” (Kovacs, 2012, 96). James T Knauer (1980), in his commentary on Arendt, suggested that while some specific modes of “human association” (p. 726) validate and preserve freedom, others attenuate its periphery. He noted that the relationship between action and freedom is better comprehended when a preexisting political arena is already in operation. The course of human actions and political affairs correspond to and evolve around such an arena, which in turn contributes directly to their emancipation.

In the manner of Kovacs’s observation, Kalyvas (2008) maintains that apart from referring to Aristotle’s distinction between the public and private arena in ancient Greek society, Arendt has never considered freedom explicitly of some teleological significance. In keeping with Kovacs, Kalyvas (2008) finds that Arendt’s critique of freedom has solely critical culminations and is conceived as a potential outcome of ensuing political endeavours. Most of Arendt’s arguments on freedom, notes Kalyvas (2008), are directed against the projection of personal freedom as a means of establishing self-mastery and free will. To Arendt, this development amounts to a modern subversion of political liberty. Kalyvas (2008) believes Arendt’s work to be more of a critical review of the established doctrines of freedom and individual autonomy and does not offer a suitable and comprehensive alternative to these concepts (p. 201). In light of the present argument, Arendt thoroughly criticizes the unscrupulous pursuit of self-contentment and personal interests as highly anti-political because such notions undermine the very foundation of plurality and essentially defy the possibility of a public space.

In this regard, any considerable provision for mutual deliberation that includes spatial and intersubjective engagement within a shared space is an indication of freedom that has already been established. This process of deliberation upholds unresolved contradictions that stimulate formative tension among participants who recognize each other’s entitlement to speech. Through articulation and rearticulation, participants are distinctly revealed. In the words of Kalyvas (2008), “To be able to reveal oneself in front of an audience of peers means that a public space of freedom has been firmly established, constitutional norms for regulating the agonistic contest instituted, and the boundaries that delineate the proper frontiers of the political defined” (p. 203).

Moreover, Arendt perceives action to be inherently unpredictable. The actor in the process holds no sway over the course of subsequent occurrences beforehand. This very disposition of action is, in a sense, incommensurable, as the meaning of action can be fully realized only when action is seen in its entirety. In other words, an action can be justified or duly comprehended only once it has obtained a closure or “[A]s soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past” (Arendt, 1998, p. 192). The end of action essentially reveals more to the narrator than its agent and attests meaning to the occurrences and reason to the sequences only in retrospect. This “predicament of unpredictability” (Arendt, 1998, p. 194), mentioned by Arendt (1998), is nonlinear and relocates the agent and his essence posthumously as a “story [the keeper of all the revelations made by an agent]” (p. 184). A story underlines the minute description of who the actor revealed himself to be in tandem with speech and action rather than what he represented. Kalyvas further observes (2008) that Arendt’s perception of freedom is fundamentally entwined with the notion of spontaneous beginning. This potential is actualized whenever political actors act concertedly not only to disclose themselves in the pursuit of the extraordinary but also equally to found institutions, legal structures and constitutional bodies, i.e., “freedom as founding” (Kalyvas 2008, 203), to preserve human plurality. In this context, freedom is manifested in the creation of concrete statutory bodies that correspondingly make public disclosure possible.

3.4. Intersubjective recognition and the disclosure of the “who”

In the view of Arendt, the disclosure of the ‘who’, i.e., the revelation of one’s distinct identity, could be comprehended only in the modalities of speech and action. When identifying an actor through the process of action, Arendt
(1998) finds speech to be sacrosanct. In her words, “No other human performance requires speech to be the same extent as action” (Arendt, 1998, p. 179). She considered action alone to be redundant. Even when performed concertedly, action remains a mere means to attain subjective interests, unless supplemented with the provision of speech. It is through deeds and articulation that one unfolds the dimensions of himself and what he could become. This “disclosure of the agent in the act” (Arendt, 1998, p. 180) is achieved only when an action is performed in accordance with the integrated human plurality, i.e., the principle that acknowledges the presence of others as equals and corresponds to a putative world order “where people are with others and neither for nor against them” (Arendt, 1998, p. 180). Arendt (1998) calls this phenomenon human togetherness. A presumed state of human existence whereby action in concert with speech reveals the actor, the agent, the “hero” (Arendt, 1998, p. 184) as “who” (Arendt, 1998, p. 179) he distinctly is. Any disintegration in the order of this relatedness would render speech practically inconsequential and action only as a means to justify one of the many ends or achievements met by human performances.

Moreover, such disclosure of the ‘who’ is not essentially linked to one’s personal calibre, wilfulness or Intentions but rather manifests only in relation to the potential others. Arendt (1998) rightly states, “This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide-is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this "who" in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. In contrast, it is more than likely that the "who," which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the daimon in the Greek religion, which accompanies each man through his whole life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters” (p. 179-180). In addition, Arendt (1998) maintains that acting without the provision of speech involves refuting plurality altogether and vitiate freedom, which often ends “in mute violence” (p. 179). It is “the web of intersubjective plurality” (Kovacs, 2012, p. 96) that marks the fulcrum of the public realm and upholds a “common and shared world” (2012, p. 96) through action, where a likely attestation of speech to a provident space is comprehensible. In other words, the condition of human plurality remains the most essential and condinging precondition for the precinct of human action in the process of justifying freedom. Even though the notion of plurality essentially conditions the world of the homo faber, it is only action, noted as Arendt, that corresponds to it being more engaging than the other two modes of activities, namely, labor and work. In this sense, to act is to spatialize and stipulate “the constant presence of the others” (Arendt, 1998, p. 23), and it is a prerogative to be validated only by free men.

The world in which humans appear and perform is also the locus where an incessant series of occurrences intersect with one another, often concurrently. Arendt (1998) identifies them collectively as “stories” (p. 184). In their “living reality” (Arendt, 1998, p. 184), these ‘stories’ reveal the agent, the “hero” (Arendt, 1998, p.184); nevertheless, it is never the agent who holds their authorship. Through deeds and words, the agent affects others around him uniquely, and as he must act within a preexisting “web of human relationships” (Arendt, 1998, p. 185), he becomes a contributor to the innumerable number of events and possibilities being turned into “some worldly objective reality” (Arendt, 1998, p. 182). He remains an active witness to the flux of free-flowing and immutable affairs at play and is often the subject “who sets the whole process into motion” (Arendt, 1998, p. 185).

The actor is thus always revealed and consociated against the backdrop of a story. As the actor performs amidst an infinite number of potential actors, the end of any action further culminates in a chain of possible actions and reactions. Whereas all the works and creations of an actor reveal “what” (Arendt 1998, 179) he or she is and all the qualities and commonalities he or she shares with peers, only through “stories” is the “who” (Arendt 1998, 179) or the distinct persona of the actor revealed. Arendt conceived of ‘stories’ as the metaphorical receptacle that recounts the disclosure of one’s unique identity, and in the process, the agent or the ‘hero’ remains “tangible ex post facto through action and speech” (Arendt, 1998, p. 186).

Such a notion of Arendt’s ‘hero’ finds its credulity in the Homeric interpretation of the term, wherein this ‘hero’ is a free man who is not only liberated from a life of mere necessities but also a unique participant in a story, his own story that is being made and told. The impression of asserting oneself to a life of action, that is, “exposing one’s self” (Arendt, 1998, p. 186) to worldly affairs outside the periphery of the private realm, warrants courage. Apart from the fact that suffering is inevitable in any form of action, one must be willing to bear the consequences to achieve the end of action, i.e., excellence. Courage in concert with action and speech legitimizes freedom for the actor, who thereby remains the ‘hero’ in the process, and his quiddity primarily stems from courage. In his essay Action’s Disclosure of the ‘Who’ and the ‘World’, Tchir (2017) observes that Arendt’s notion of the ‘hero’ does not correspond to a sovereign and inimitable order of political action. He explains that as the actor hereon performs while sharing the same arena with a diverse array of performers who differ significantly in pattern and perspective, it is not feasible for him to exert absolute control over the results, forms, or meaning that he creates, discloses, or derives. This inclination toward forming novel yet unpredictable relationships (Tchir, 2017, p. 25) makes action inseparable from the revelation of the ‘who’. Tchir (2017) succinctly interprets Arendt: “While the actor, as an initiator of new processes, is the subject and sufferer of their life story, they are not its author or producer; they do not stand in relation to the outcome of their story as one who masters it” (p. 25). Furthermore, Tchir (2017) notes that this
revelation is equally emancipatory as the individual actor involved in the process confronts and sustains “the paralyzing internal conflicts of the will” (p. 27) and eventually individuates oneself through dialogue with others. This awakens and brings forth the internality of the ‘who’ to the world; thus, such self-realization in itself pertains to the actuality of worldly freedom.

Accordingly, if to be free is to procure action and to act is to sustain and validate recognition, then it must be integrated in a manner where words and deeds complement each other because words without deeds would yield no active change in the political construct; similarly, without having the quality to reason and articulate, the end of meaning would only resonate in violence. Moreover, Arendt (1998), in contrast with Emanuel Kant, located political freedom outside the periphery of free will, which is often governed by moral statutes. For her, action is deemed meaningful only if it is actualized into something worldly relevant (Arendt, 1998). In other words, the capacity to obtain discernible modulations within the real world determines the essence and legitimacy of action. In one of his depictions of Arendt’s notion of a political actor, Kateb (1997) observes that for Arendt, a political actor must possess qualities such as courage, judgment, self-regulation, etc., to perform publicly. Such potential exhibition of one’s performance, he notes, is indispensably entwined with the becoming of one’s politically “distinctive performer” (Kateb, 1997, p. 150). This performance is essentially self-exploratory in nature and ascribes to the natural courses of concomitant events. Therefore, the actor presumably holds no sway over its direction and outcome. During the process, the potential actor undergoes a teleological transmutation. He sublimates and surpasses his own limitations rather than merely arriving at who he could indubitably become. Kateb (1997) writes, “Action, like anything creative, is not an emanation or an unconditional unfolding, but an uncertain initiative in a preexistent and largely unpredictable world. The actor changes himself or herself and the world as he or she acts. He shows himself and others that he is more than he knew” (p. 150). Here, Kateb repeatedly stresses the self-exploratory attitude of the performer, as the performances are neither predetermined nor premeditated but rather sculpted and shaped both intrinsically and extrinsically in conjunction with the variables at hand. It is the sheer courage on the part of the actor to appear before the unknown that makes him “virtuosoic” (Kateb 1997, 150) and, therefore, free. Hence, the potential greatness of a political performer rests proportionately with his calibre to embrace and withstand the uncertainty inherent in the varying trajectories of his performance while resisting all urges toward precipitancy laden with indictments.

4. Final considerations

The human condition will remain in history as an august testament of Arendt’s profound critique of intersubjective recognition in the evolution of the world fabricated by man. She is one of the few critics who has frequented the construct of human action as a conditional constituent of human plurality outside the periphery of mere subjective pursuits of interest. Arendt firmly believed that the conditions of plurality and action are mutually corroborative and indispensable to any political way of life. Although controversial, her notion remains central to the founding of modern-day politics. Action, for Arendt, is subject to a conditional acknowledgment that can be achieved only when capable others are already deemed free and equal. This notion of reciprocal acknowledgment is a potential political quality unique to the public arena and, therefore, could be actualized only in the form of an interpersonal celebration of pluralism and affirmation of populational diversity within a body politic. The purpose of this study is limited to examining the activity of action concerning the political implications of human plurality and freedom; therefore, it does not include action as a separate ontological condition outside the periphery of politics. Moreover, Arendt, in her later works, progressively amended this idea of freedom and its political quintessence by adding dimensions of institutionalized constituents and the prospects of constitutional legality to its core. To conclude, in congruence with all the arguments and counterarguments investigated in this paper, it could be deduced that at the core of Arendt’s critique of the human condition rests her postulation that if the prospect of a new beginning lays latent every time the possibility of action is envisaged, mutual recognition and human relationality abide as prerequisites.

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