

**The Non-Sovereignty of Action:
Knowing Freedom through Performance**

**Liza Williams
liza_williams@brown.edu**

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The equation of freedom with agency emerges clearly in the history of political philosophy. Sovereign and non-sovereign views of freedom diverge in the relative importance that is assigned to how background social and institutional conditions affect individual agency. Should our metrics of agency factor from individuated persons or should the evaluative stance consider how agency might be distributed across multiple persons, groups, and systems? Agency, on the Kantian view of sovereignty, is located in the strength of individual will and is associated with self-control. Accordingly, an individual is free to the extent of her capacity to make her external actions in the world correlate with her inner will. Kantian freedom, in other words, signifies the autonomy of the individual actor. Embedded in the liberal tradition, this sovereign account of freedom maintains that in order to be fully free an individual's actions must track her interests and be realized in a way that is not undercut by her social environment. But, to what degree do forces outside our own control shape our agency, our efficiency in pursuing our preferences, and therefore, our chances for freedom? This question directs us away from the Kantian view of agency and toward a non-sovereign characterization of it.

The argument presented herein expands the analytical lens to consider how diffused concepts of agency¹ inform human control, therefore challenging narratives where freedom equates to self-mastery. In order to do this, I present four models of freedom that connect

¹ The word used in the secondary literature to describe this idea of agency is "distributed." Sharon Krause, "Freedom, Power, and Political Action," Brown University, Fall 2012.

agency with performance by claiming its indispensable role in the constitution of ideas, identities and beliefs. As a practice, performance covers the reflexive dynamic that happens in the space between people; it is the productive site where ideas and language are translated and assigned shared terms of meaning. Various modes of performance underscore how the dramatic consists of reciprocal exchanges between persons and groups, which helps model the distributed nature of agency posited by the non-sovereigntist view.

This paper elucidates the normative implications for freedom when agency is understood from this standpoint. Upon initial consideration, a metaphoric of performance might seem overwrought as an expressive template for how agency relates to freedom, but the heuristic reveals some noteworthy attributes of freedom as a normative ideal, which makes the complexity of the model appealing. First, the approach clarifies how the expansion of freedom is prefigured upon the necessary disruption, and therefore possible transformation, of ethicopolitical commitments; second, it appreciates how normative analysis depends upon sensory perception (or the accurate differentiation of what seems to be in the world versus what is real); and third, it reveals how rationalist methodologies rely upon cognitive features of judgment that deeply shape the way we debate value.²

² Usually, action for rationalists is guided by the intentional stance of an individual actor and is explained by a summation of desires and beliefs (action = desire + beliefs). For rational choice thinkers, to be rational means to do what you *believe* to be in your interest. The depiction of performance as a way of understanding action can be seen as a *tool of construction* that provides an analytical contour to the *beliefs* that motivate purposive actors under strictly rationalist explanations. Performance also brings to the forefront how perception is part of political decision-making. Our knowledge of something usually equates to our perception of a thing. Thinking about how something is perceived exposes aspects of our cognitive processes, which helps explain the microfoundations of judgment and belief. Beliefs ought not to be equated with strict rationalism because our mind takes shortcuts to compensate for the vastness of informational inputs (Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1976)). Moreover, my position in this paper, which criticizes the presumptive sovereigntist position of most rationalist pictures of agency, generally outlines two lines of dispute. In the *thin* version of my critique, I show how rationalist methods might be seen as consistent with a constructivist ontological position. Standard rationalist theories are agnostic about the substantive content of desires/interests: that is, ideational and material explanations can compete for space under the framework of preferences, but as a methodology governing how individuals decide to act,

Broadly conceived, non-sovereign characterizations of human agency emphasize how contingent and intersubjective elements determine degrees of freedom. More precisely, these accounts depict human agency as fundamentally distributed, meaning that it can only be measured *across* individuals, identities, and sociopolitical institutions.³ Why is this paramount for the non-sovereignists? These thinkers hold that efficacy partially determines understandings of human agency; therefore, the theorization of agency is incomplete without a consideration of how social and political relationships influence action once it is undertaken.

A number of scholars who share a non-sovereign outlook have drawn a close connection between modes of political performance, the resignification of dominant social norms, and the

rationalism has shortcomings in explaining two things: first, the origination of actor-beliefs; and second, how beliefs interact with desires to guide decision making in the world. A non-sovereign understanding of agency helps supplement both of these shortcomings in the standard rationalist picture of agency. Ultimately, however, a non-sovereign idea of agency weakens the methodological individualism that rationalists deploy because the capacity for political judgment exists as an internal product of local community ties, networks of power, and dependence upon shared terms of collective meaning given by language and culture. Social-psychological constructivist arguments can provide needed depth to the explanation of how beliefs interact with desires, and can expose how perception influences political action; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). In the *thick* version of my dispute with rationalism, I describe the most devastating consequence for rationalism given a non-sovereign view of agency. This view rejects rationalism's overriding logic of instrumentalism, which reduces all actions to a function of use-value. Non-sovereignists disavow that all action is a function of preference-satisfaction: human agency is far richer in its origins and expands beyond this neoutilitarian ethic.

³ Alternatively, the distributed nature of agency could be defined as taking into account the material consequences of the nonhuman world, but my definition here restricts itself to only considering distributions of agency across what would be considered part of the human world. Jane Bennett and William Connolly have both considered if nonhuman matter recalibrates agentic possibilities. See, for example: Jane Bennett, "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to New Materialism," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, 47 – 69 (Duke UP Books, 2010) and William Connolly, "Materialities of Experience," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, 178 – 200 (Duke UP Books, 2010). While this is a compelling point in the literature on the meaning of distributed conceptualizations of agency, I restrict myself to measuring agency across persons and political institutions firmly located in the social world of human interaction. My definition encompasses the pertinent question of how the materiality of the human body affects political action. Of course, this added consideration expands what is meant by distributed concepts of agency at the material level, but it is still limited by the overriding interest in the nature of human life. Diana Coole is helpful in drawing this corporeal boundary even within the new scholarly turn toward understanding the oppressive and freedom-enhancing aspects of materialist beginnings. She is steadfast in showing how the human remains the locus of agency. By delineating the body as an analytic beginning, her non-sovereign depiction of agency reconstructs thinking in French phenomenology to demonstrate how the "generativity of flesh" does matter for describing the relationship between agency and freedom: "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of the Flesh," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, 92 - 115 (Duke UP Books, 2010).

possibility for sustaining human freedom. Although inconsistent in crucial respects, Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, and Linda Zerilli each make explicit how performance might cultivate a normative commitment to freedom. Since the overall effectiveness of an individual's action matters for describing agency according to non-sovereignists, the aforementioned theorists see the germaneness of social and political relationships to the production or non-production of freedom.⁴ As a potentially transformative practice, performance is a pathway to altering the social relationships theorized as integral to distributed notions of human agency. While the relationship between performance and the production of greater freedom is not unidirectional in its possible effects (performance can also enable conditions of unfreedom), the uncertain and disruptive aspects of performance problematize the easy assumption of independence, rationality, and control marking the advance of freedom. This paper will identify the disruptive ways that performance modifies previous social and institutional matrices of power, but my discussion will not endorse performance as tantamount to the actualization of freedom. Instead of reducing freedom to performance, I illustrate how performance is a mode of action that can create openings for reordering relations of power.⁵ My

⁴ The notion that efficacy enriches agency is largely derivative in the history of political thought. The observation places importance upon how others receive and interpret an action once it appears in the external world. Thus, if the effectiveness of an action matters for a theory of agency, the intentional stance of the purposive actor becomes subordinated in certain ways to the subsequent meanings that are attached to action. Some have credited Arendt with the notion that efficacy is a part of political agency, especially in her emphasis upon how others receive and assign understanding to action. But, the full thrust of the attribution is intellectually awkward. Importantly, Arendt would have grave objections to thinking of political agency in an instrumentalist fashion. Her view is more expansive in its idea of how others act as "bearers" to action once it appears in the world. In fact, Arendtian political agency is distinctive precisely because it cannot be subsumed under a "means-end" logic of needs-satisfaction. Linda Zerilli argues the point that Arendt "warns against the instrumentalist attitude" in her framing of political agency (*Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, Chicago UP, 2005), 3). Zerilli says that this is why Arendt valorizes political action over social activity that merely seeks the satisfaction of interests.

⁵ To say that freedom equates to performance is a reduction amounting to conflation, but to suggest that performance is a mode of action that can transform prevailing relations of power in favorable and unfavorable ways holds onto desirable emancipatory routes.

view suggests that this state of *openness* is a necessary precondition for freedom. Thus, the purpose of my argument demonstrates how performance animates possibilities for freedom in its possible transfiguration of ideas, identities, and institutions.

The Non-Sovereignty of Performance Art and Reality

Within communities of American artists in the late 1950s and 1960s in New York and elsewhere, there was a non-sovereign turn that began to emerge in art theory symbolizing the ideal of freedom for artists and participant viewers. Allen Kaprow, who galvanized the practice, theorized that artists needed to act in order to portray the limits of freedom. Overturning technical aspects of aesthetics, the *Happenings* accomplished a great deal in discrediting assumptions about how art was created: these spontaneous and conspicuous events involved interaction between artist-actors and public viewers, suggesting that art works could form through processes that were unpredictable, plastic, and ongoing. By compelling the engagement of viewers, performance artists thought interaction with the everyday world would inspire a *concept of care* for the world. Introducing a non-sovereign understanding of what art consisted of, performance artists took to the streets of places like Manhattan believing that real art had to happen in the view of the public, outside of the closed and controlled spaces of galleries and museums.

These events and situations became the inspiration for the well-known performances of Vito Acconci, Francis Alÿs, and Marina Abramovic, whose contemporary influence has challenged the idea that the production of art has to be controlled and contained, and blended the boundaries between art and life. For example, as a performance artist who adopts a non-sovereign theoretical standpoint, in *Re-enactments* (2000), Alÿs bought a gun, cocked it and then openly carried it through the streets of Mexico City to better understand the limits of

freedom in our society and bring viewers into his *performance*. His action ended with police tackling him and removing him and his weapon from the streets after eleven minutes. In 2010, the Tate Modern exhibited a video documentation of the act, and today you can watch the display of Alÿs moving along the sidewalks of Mexico City via YouTube.⁶ The performativity of his art reveals not only something about the character of the artist, but it discloses certain realities about what the boundaries of freedom mean today. What are limits of freedom for visibly armed citizens in the ethicopolitical context of Mexico City? How do art aficionados touring London feel about it?

Agency and Freedom: How Free or Determined are our Actions?

Arendt enunciates how agency is the impulse behind all living things, even the world itself. On Arendt's view, individuals can interrupt and alter the social system of representation through political judgment, debate and acts of world-making. "To act, in its most general sense," she declares, "means to take an initiative, to begin...to set something into motion."⁷ She adds that the idea of newness implies "startling unexpectedness"⁸ insofar that world-building does not imply any predetermined set of causes. In this sense, inaugural action is untethered to the historical past and the previous order of things: "It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before."⁹ According to Arendt, the wellspring of imagination and creativity that affords the possibility of beginning something new emerges from the vast diversity of the human experience. She affirms that "plurality [is] the basic condition of both action and speech,"¹⁰ indicating that where human

⁶ In 2011, MoMa acquired the video installation of *Re-enactments*.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1958), 177.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 177 – 178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

agency is disabled, we find corresponding losses in its *primordial* foundation: pluralism. In the same way that biodiversity enables the natural world's creative processes, human difference is the resilient guarantor of possible newness for Arendt. Additionally, it justifies the enterprise of politics for it represents the uncaused cause. Since heterogeneity means that difference will always persist in the world, politics is the act of *caring* for this difference because we cannot help ourselves to a position affording non-judgment. With recognition of fundamental difference, Arendt argues, we value life and its sustaining capabilities.

While Arendt's idea of what counts as an inaugural action evinces that political imagination and creativity are forces that disrupt prevailing social structures and norms, her non-sovereign view of action is at tension with theories that reveal how domination is productive of the subject in the first place. For example, Judith Butler's social-psychological account pushes back against pure Arendtian "natality"¹¹ as the vanguard of freedom. In the landscape between free and determined conceptions of agency, Butler radically restricts the very notion of an agent. She identifies how relations of dependence influence subject-formation, making operations of power inseparable from the pronouncement of individual interests, identities, beliefs, and actions.¹² From this standpoint where social-psychic conditioning of the self circumscribes agential possibilities, Butler's idea of agency contrasts with the more radically free inclinations

¹¹ Ibid., 178, 191, 247.

¹² Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997). It is intriguing how Butler's concern with excavating how the subject comes to desire certain interests under conditions of dependence resembles one theme expressed in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, where he explores illusive aspects of freedom in modern market societies. Like Butler, he clearly sees how subordination constitutes an ongoing process of subject-formation. He also relates the violent dramatics of implicit in the production of a guilt-ridden conscience (all of his essays about his sex life attest to this). D.F.W. observes that when humans experience an unsatisfied act of willing, they experience psychological suffering. To the extent that humans want to avoid experiences of suffering, D.F.W. explains how this feeling enfeebles agency. This is why addictive forms of entertainment haunt the exercise of human agency in his novel. A careful reader of Derrida and Wittgenstein, D.F.W. describes the human mind and psyche as an empty crucible waiting to be filled, manipulated, and shaped by a corrosive superstructure, resplendent with mass entertainment and language games that cripple exercises of human agency.

of Arendtian creation where action exists as a method of world-building. If subject-formation happens such that humans are unable to fully author their own passions and interests apart from the determining influence of others, Butler's position seemingly challenges the plausibility of Arendtian inaugural acts, which she states "may be stimulated by the presence of others...but...never conditioned by them."¹³ How might we think of what constitutes an Arendtian act of beginning given the limitations upon agency provided in Butler's criticism? One way to reconcile the obvious tension between more fully free versus more fully determined conceptions of human agency found in Arendt and Butler considers the role that performance holds in each respective theory.

The theoretical foreclosure upon the possibility for humans to bring newness into the world is not exhausted given the extent of Butler's Foucauldian frame for how power constrains the possibilities of human agency. While Butler's interpretation reveals how processes of subjectification encroach upon possibilities for human agency to break free from preexisting operations of power, it would be a misunderstanding to think that her theory is wholly incompatible with Arendt's view of political action as creation. Even within the confines of Butler's own view, transgression constitutes agency. While it is true that Butler does not think acts of resistance move beyond the fact that disciplining forms of power produce the subject, her more determined view of agency still allows for transformation of prevailing norms and configurations of power in a way that preserves certain aspects of Arendtian freedom. While transgression in Butler's account departs in significant ways from what Arendt would name inaugural action, the performance of resistance in both views interrupts the stagnant processes of *automatism* that exist in nature and in political life. In both views, modes of political protest and

¹³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1958) 177.

engagement catalyze freedom. Through protest and engagement, we make others perceive more accurately the real lived experience of human (and sometimes nonhuman) life.

The Non-Sovereign Character of Political Action in Arendt

Non-sovereign accounts of the relationship between freedom and agency have pointed out that the Kantian position does not adequately weigh the effect that background institutions and social interactions have upon facilitating or impeding the realization of agential capacities. More specifically, non-sovereign views emphasize that an individual's overall achievement of freedom depends upon how others assess the meaning of her actions. In this vein, Arendt asserts that freedom can be further enabled when a community of bearers witnesses political action in a certain way. She emphasizes the role that public spectatorship has in determining the character of political action once it appears. This shift to contemplating how action is received extends our view beyond merely the moment of actor-centered *doing* and instead draws attention to both the "boundlessness"¹⁴ of action and to the location of agency at the crossroads of human interaction. Arendtian action has both a beginning and a phase of completion in which others in the political community "...join by "bearing" and "finishing" the enterprise, by seeing it through."¹⁵ Political action, she argues, instantiates unintended consequences and can cascade in its effects because it is intertwined with how onlookers interpret its appearance.¹⁶ For Arendt, political action is more

¹⁴ Ibid., 191.

¹⁵ Ibid., 189.

¹⁶ To protect the livelihood of the shared human experience, Arendt argues that we need methods of forgiveness and promising precisely because of the indeterminate effects of action. Promising can help stabilize our actions and carve out "islands of security" which we would otherwise not have: "The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done through one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises" *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1958) 237.

fully developed when it is received by others.¹⁷ For this reason, she locates action as a generative *principle* of freedom if it takes place in “intercourse” between humans:

These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people...¹⁸

In order for an action to be fully free and developed it must risk the evaluation of others. This external dependence that action has contributes to Arendt’s account of agency as partially a relational phenomenon.

Functionally, Arendtian action remakes the boundaries of meaning that exist between people: “Action...always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.”¹⁹ Since action has this quality of crossing over conventional boundaries and disrupting shared terms of meaning, Arendt’s standpoint renders freedom radically contingent upon an intricate “...“web” of human relationships...”.²⁰ This helps Arendt establish the ways that ethicopolitical commitments can be transformed through the performativity of speech and other forms of communication. Accordingly, political events happen in Arendt’s view from the virtuous performance of *uniting* words and deeds. She elaborates on this point by observing that each alone is corruptible: without deeds, speech can equate to propaganda, and in the absence of speech, deeds can become mere violence and cruelty.²¹ This is why the speech act occupies an ideal and privileged place in the performance of what it means to be fully free in Arendtian thought. While speech is initiated by an actor and identifies the hidden character of the speaker, the full discursive meaning of

¹⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1977), 167.

¹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1958) 182.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 178 – 181.

spoken words remains contingent upon audience reception. Performative acts bring words and deeds together and contribute to the signaling that happens between people. Thus, the speech act functions to assign constitutive meaning in the social world. Communication grounds the very plausibility of a political community in Arendt making the public realm synonymous with a spatial arena where speech, acts and signaling take place.

Not only is political action indeterminate in the Arendtian sense because of the fact that it endures beyond the moment of initiation in a “chain reaction,”²² but its “inherent unpredictability”²³ stems from the impossibility of knowing the identity of the actor prior to her performative act. For Arendt, somebody does not possess an identity antecedent to action. Only through doing, writes Arendt, can the identity of the actor be disclosed. In other words, action as it relates to the constitution of the self is external in its orientation because spectatorship is what fully identifies the subject-actor as an entity capable of making an authoritative claim in the context of a political community. In describing the spectatorial aspects of political activity, making it always subject to perceptual dynamics, Arendt insists that communication requires an appearance before others – it is a prerequisite for being understood. In this sense, performance embodies Arendtian politics. To my mind, Arendt thinks the public gaze introduces the potential gesture of somebody else caring.²⁴ It helps generate the identity of the actor, while also honoring her standing as citizen. To be viewed, and possibly understood, produces the conditions for political membership. Arendt’s idea of action as antecedent to identity-creation means that political claims are never performed by a fully formed subject; instead, the act of claiming before others is constitutive of the subject’s desires and interests. The fact of *self-disclosure* gives the

²² Ibid., 190.

²³ Ibid., 191.

²⁴ This should seem obvious given Arendt’s basic acceptance of Heidegger’s ontological stance.

moment of beginning a distinctive place in Arendtian theory, but it also demonstrates how social others mediate claims to identity. This core contribution closely relates to another component of Arendt's non-sovereign view of action.

Action is unpredictable not only because it cannot be anticipated in advance and the identity of the actor is undisclosed prior to its public appearance, but also because the actor does not occupy the privileged capacity which enables her to fully understand the knowledge of her deeds. Instead, Arendt theorizes that the epistemic advantage for knowing what action means is afforded to retrospective views: "Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants."²⁵ This insight attests to Arendt's belief that impartiality is enhanced when judgment happens at a distance from action; thus, it seems that she subordinates the judgment of actors to the judgment of spectators, while still maintaining that it is difficult to attain any Archimedean standpoint that allows for a fully objective account of political action. This is why political action always remains spectacular for Arendt: our best efforts at impartial judgment come only from our memory of what was seen in a public display.

If politics is spectacle in this sense, it is always only discovered in performance, a condition which situates actor and spectator in view of each other.²⁶ This obviously introduces some margin of error to claiming truth, but Arendt's point is clearly at odds with the Platonic tradition. She observes that our limited perception prevents us from occupying something like

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1958) 192.

²⁶ David Underdown and Mark Kishlansky agree that this is the mode of early modern politics in England. Performance oriented political practice insofar that ritual pageantry and symbolic forms of communication stabilized rule under the Tudors and Stuarts. While this gesture toward early modern cultural history might seem out of place, here, I mention it to highlight how cultural and intellectual history becomes relevant for political theory. Understanding public discourse and ritual spectacle as political performance has normative relevance to contemporary democratic thought. I am indebted to Carl Estabrook who helped me understand this a long time ago.

an Archimedean standpoint, but this ought to heighten our admiration of what emerges in political life rather than dissuading our engagement. Like Heidegger directs, Arendt also thinks that the knower exists outside the world; for both, the world is the object that the mind perceives, but knowing is not part of the world itself.²⁷ The unpreventable perspectival glance of determining what action means does not alleviate actors and spectators from their obligation to judge, it merely suggests that our knowledge of political events is only open to a faculty of judgment.²⁸ Arendt's perspectivism disputes the notion that the world can be known from an external point, unbounded by our own cognitive faculties of knowing and perception.²⁹ She thinks that this abstract cognitive position is a mistake that is a convenient way for the philosopher to map their own prejudices onto truth-claiming about reality, when actually their ideas emanate from faculties of judgment. Arendt thinks human agency is anchored in the empirical world and mediated by a situated subject. The appearance of action in the world – its performance – galvanizes attention in a way that asks for our reflective judgments, not because we need to verify the use-value of an event or the epistemic assumptions of a statement, but because we might appreciate qualities of life from an internal standpoint. Moreover, Arendt desires to reject the possibility that humans are merely driven by an *instrumental* search for interest-satisfaction or preferences. While agency itself might have some higher end like freedom, Arendt does not think that human emotion and behavior can be reduced to merely a calculation of interests since it denies human sentiment and the spontaneity of actions.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (NY, NY: Harpers, 1927) 87; Michael Ermarth, "Topics in Twentieth Century German History," Dartmouth College, Fall 2004.

²⁸ Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005) 130 – 134.

²⁹ Her basic argument about, I think, goes like this: If there were such a world that could be known from an external objective position, we could not know it. Information about it that we do know, we know from a certain perspective, and that perspective is contingent upon such lower level facts like our physiology, our interpretive skills, our capacity for inquiry, our culture, and our language. Acts of knowing are part of the social world. Arendt's position is not akin to a standpoint of relativism although it has often been misunderstood to be so.

All of this amounts to the worthy mention that Arendt maintains a phenomenology of perception not unlike Heidegger's critical response to Descartes through Hume: When we perceive something that exists in the world, we are conscious of the fact that it really does exist as reality in the world rather than perceiving the thing as merely being a representation in our minds. The imprint of Heidegger here on Arendt's thought is clear. The extensive influence of his basic ontology in her philosophy has to do with his characterization of nature as *dasein*. He thinks *dasein* means "care" and explains this as the basic fundamental structure of human existence.³⁰ The first feature of *dasein* has to do with our being in the world, and the second feature has to do with the relation that we have to ourselves.³¹ While our various concerns situate us in the world, taking up these activities has a corresponding constitutive effect on the relation that we have to ourselves. Each component implies the existence of the other: being in the world has to do with our relationship to ourselves, and vice versa (the relationship that we have to ourselves is constitutive of our relationship to being in the world). Heidegger espouses that these are both relations of knowledge, which alienates his philosophy from the Cartesian tradition that insists that self-knowledge (or our thoughts) stabilize reality. Heidegger instead writes that we are not fundamentally related to ourselves through the contents of our own minds. Like Arendt, Heidegger theorizes that we are fundamentally related to ourselves because we are beings with possibilities, and that these possibilities are up to us to realize. This standpoint relishes the volitional and practical aspects of politics rather than the cognitive explanation of political action; it also instantiates future opportunities for freedom in our willingness to be open to newness.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927, chapter 6.

³¹ Michael Ermarth, "Topics in Twentieth Century German History," Dartmouth College; Fall 2005.

The assumption that a community of bearers will always exist to perceive an individual's actions is problematic in Arendt's analysis because it disallows for exercised forms of agency that are undertaken privately. She eliminates the possibility that political action can be performed as a solitary feat: "Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act."³² It is definitely odd that private actions like writing in a journal, meditating alone, or humming a tune on a solitary hike through the mountains might receive less attention under Arendt's concept of what it means to act freely, but these examples prove less concerning to the question of living well together. Although the examples do destabilize Arendt's comprehensive view of agency, the damage can be overstated. While these aforementioned solitary exercises are agential, their relevance ought to be qualified. In focusing upon them, we undervalue Arendt's warning against political complacency. Her concept of political agency maintains that contested differences cannot be overcome by simply pretending they do not exist. When human choices remain hidden and outside the view of others, Arendt thinks we humiliate life itself and disregard our obligations to care for the world. Her concern with pluralism accounts for her insistence that political action must take an interactive context and appear in a public space. If we are insulated from others, we cannot attend to the differences between us. Since solitary pursuits do not activate our phenomenal senses in other-regarding ways, Arendt theorizes we remain disinterested in caring for life. The incapacitating effects of this are so severe that it seems unintelligible to identify isolation with the possibility of human agency. While Arendt acknowledges that strictly private actions can and will affect the

³² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1958) 188.

world, her concern for agency as it relates to political freedom explains the deficits in her thinking regarding hidden content that does not appear before the view of others.³³

At the core of her complaint with private life – of the gratifying interests of the body – is its bias for instrumentalist logic.³⁴ She disparages neo-utilitarian ethics and thinks that human freedom is a *self-standing* reason for explaining action. Thus, she reckons that any retreat into the self must either undermine political freedom, or more likely, be nonpolitical in its content. While her notion that solitary acts cannot be fully free in a political sense compromises the rationale for a freestanding theory of agency, and additionally raises a host of significant questions about Arendt's theoretical division between the public and private realms, it does not derail Arendt's overarching objective in establishing when actions are more fully or less fully free in the context of trying to correct for shortcomings in political liberalism. Her point is to outline how degrees of freedom can only be fully assessed when action is viewed from a collective standpoint. In other words, Arendt correctly perceives how the concept of political agency under modern political conceptions cannot be theorized as exogenous to social structure, or the shared understandings that exist between persons. On this point, she is emphatic that freedom has an *intersubjective* cast that awakens our feeling of it: "We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves."³⁵ Actions that are performed alone in the solitary space of the individual may indeed be agential and overlooked by Arendt, but for a reason. These acts do not carry with them *robust*

³³ The larger problem for Arendt seems to be how she draws boundaries between the public and private spheres, and her tendency to locate political and nonpolitical content within each respective arena. While Arendt locates needs-satisfaction at the site of the household, like Aristotle, her position that the private and public realms are antithetical to each other is rather overdetermined. Arendt, "The Public and Private Realm" in *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., 22 – 78 (University of Chicago Press, 1958).

³⁴ Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1977), 147.

emancipatory possibilities. Suffice it to say, in the Arendtian assessment, the appearance of political action – as interactive and performative – is synonymous with the affirmation of life.³⁶

This position explains why Arendt dismisses the Stoic vision of freedom or an ascetic ideal. The Stoic vision mistakes power with the *feeling* of power, which animates Arendt's attack on the tradition's inability to contemplate the proper sources of human motivation and agency: it leads people to think that reductions in agency are in fact enhancements. This sort of logical contradiction makes Arendt contemptuous of the Stoic vision, which she thinks systematically undermines value for life. If taken to extremes, acts of self-destruction become its prevailing logic. Such contradiction, which aims to rationalize suicide, cannot be intelligible if life's possibilities are fully respected. The vision cannot, she thinks, enable freedom because the retreat into the interior self and the renunciation of worldly desires conflates freedom with a sovereign view of agency that is actor-centered. She writes:

If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth – and not, as the tradition since Plato holds, because of man's limited strength, which makes him depend upon the help of others. All the recommendations the tradition has to offer to overcome the tradition of non-sovereignty and win an untouchable integrity of the human person amount to a compensation for the intrinsic "weakness" of plurality. Yet, if these recommendations were followed and this attempt to overcome the consequences of plurality were successful, the result would be not so much sovereign domination of one's self as arbitrary domination of all others, or as in Stoicism, the exchange of the real world for an imaginary one where these other would simply not exist.³⁷

The Stoic vision of freedom cannot possibly preserve the conditions for pluralism because in the retreat into the self, humans forget that political freedom is a collective ideal motivating the realization of man's fullest capacities. In her trenchant criticism of Iasiah Berlin's liberalism, Arendt highlights the deficiencies of not transcending the sphere of private necessities or self-

³⁶ Her stance is not primarily aimed at discrediting how the personal often does become political. Although by noting this, I do not think Arendt is easily rescued from accusations of antifeminism.

³⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1958) 234.

care. By engaging in the *vita activa*, one gains the possibility of transforming relations of power and living up to her highest aspirations dictated by her human condition.

Arendtian Performance: The Disruptive Rational in Non-Sovereignty

While it conveys many qualities, Arendtian performance is disruptive: being alive means that humans act out of spontaneity, not necessity. This means that Arendtian modes of political performance cannot be subsumed under a narrative of self-mastery. Likewise, performance expands beyond the mere logic of associating human choices with use-value. Arendt's view is perhaps best captured by her statement that freedom entails giving up on the myth of sovereignty contained in liberalism:

...freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously. Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the "general will" of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.³⁸

Freedom she says should not be tied to the mere acts of self-willing, because if this is so, we forget that "the world is at stake"³⁹ and that the primary task of politics is its moral obligation to preserve conditions for human pluralism. In her criticism of liberalism, she argues that politics is performative because she wants to disturb an overly tight relationship between individual will and freedom.⁴⁰ Moreover, her overarching criticism of liberalism reaches to certain institutional configurations of power. She thinks that when power becomes solidified in institutional prescriptions freedom is debased; thus, for Arendt institutions should always be *resistible* and have an open texture that affords political reform.⁴¹ Here, again, Arendt supports Heidegger's

³⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1977), 163.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1977), 163; *On Revolution* (London, UK: Penguin Classics: 1963).

idea of transcendence: freedom becomes a possibility through openness and disappears in the closure of sovereignty.⁴²

The performative aspect of Arendtian politics derives from the fact that political authority remains unfinished and constantly demands human engagement if it is to maintain the normative promise of setting men free. Her ideal of politics as the arena of action does not mean that its goal is to establish *fixed* social meanings; instead, for Arendt, the purposive nature of politics is to create institutions where the continual remaking of shared social meaning is possible through the speech act.⁴³ Unlike a piece of *finished* artwork, political authority, Arendt theorizes, is radically contingent and fleeting in its appearance. It can never be completed because the normative demand for freedom makes political engagement indispensable to its further delivery. When political action is performed, its appearance generates the enabling conditions for political freedom because it asks, yet again, for our reflective judgment:

Since all acting contains an element of virtuosity, and because virtuosity is the excellence we ascribe to the performing arts, politics has often been defined as an art. This, of course, is not a definition but a metaphor, and the metaphor becomes completely false if one falls into the common error of regarding the state or government as a work of art, as a kind of collective masterpiece. In the sense of the creative arts, which bring forth something tangible and reify human thought to such an extent that the produced thing possesses an existence of its own, politics is the exact opposite of an art – which incidentally does not mean that it is a science. Political institutions, no matter how well or how badly designed, depend for continued existence upon acting men; their conservation is achieved by the same means that brought them into being. Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action.⁴⁴

Politics is performative to the extent that it serves as a vehicle for the creation for human freedom; if the laws of the state become a self-standing product of performance then Arendt sees how this nullifies chances for emancipation under the state.⁴⁵ The possibility of freedom is preserved through making sure that legal authority never takes on the cast of unbreakable

⁴² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927, chapter 6.

⁴³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (NY, NY: Penguin, 1977), 151.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁵ Bonnie Honig, “Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic,” *American Political Science Review* 85, 1 (March 1991) 97 – 113.

sovereignty. If norms become foreclosed to the possibility of human resistance than this “irresistible” power created in the law means that humans can no longer act freely.⁴⁶ If humans are to remain agential in the face of its coercive authority, political institutions must have an open texture, permitting revision.

In order to be truly free, an individual must be positioned in a voluntary relationship with the law so that she can still break with its authoritative call: “the power that meets these circumstances, that liberates, as it were, willing and knowing from their bondage to necessity is the I-can. Only where the I-will and the I-can coincide does freedom come to pass.”⁴⁷ In order for the legal authority to discipline and enable human agency, citizens must collectively will its power, but also know that it can be remade in the image of their highest aspirations. In this sense, freedom is only possible, to draw on Arendt’s formulation, when the “I-will” and the “I-can” are simultaneously a part of lawmaking and political judgment. At her best moments, Arendt clarifies that the authority of the law exists only because of the knowledge that it is collectively self-made, questionable, and ultimately, revocable.

Political performance for Arendt is disruptive to the automatic processes that compose the world. Its appearance has a spiritual and spectacular quality, which explains why she associates the “infinite improbability” of life-affirming acts with “a capacity for performing miracles.”⁴⁸ When inaugural action appears in political life, previous modes of understanding are upended by the fact that the automatic functioning of the past cannot persist. Arendt finds the determinative forces of “automatism” at stake in an array of fields – in nature, politics, history, et cetera. For all its radical newness and possibility of breaking with the past, political

⁴⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, UK: Penguin Classics: 1963): 103 – 104, 184 – 185.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (NY, NY: Penguin, 1977), 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

agency, she writes, “takes place in the midst” of preexisting forms of power: “Our political life...despite its being the realm of action, also takes place in the midst of processes which we call historical and which tend to become as automatic as natural or cosmic processes...The truth is that automatism is inherent in all processes, no matter what their origin may be.⁴⁹ This point clarifies that Arendt is easily willing to acknowledge how free acts still originate *from within the operation of power*; inaugural action is certainly not exogenous to structural forms of power. However, Arendtian performance, as world-regarding, cannot solely exist within the interiority of the mind.

Political Performance in Butler – A Philosophical View from Gender Trouble and Beyond

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler held that ritual performance brings about changes in our understanding of gender identification. Of her iconic work, Butler has written that the thesis expressed political agency in terms that recognized its inseparability from the operation of power: “The iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility.”⁵⁰ Ritual performance as a mode of self-disclosure is closely related to performativity for Butler, but specifically in her use of the latter term, Butler refers to the discursive and theatrical channels constituting gender as a social phenomenon. Within her theory, performance held transformative potential in undoing the persistent social enforcement of false binaries regarding sex and gender. By relating freedom to agency through performance and performativity, Butler argued for a non-sovereign understanding of the relationship between human agency and freedom. This might loosen the political enforcement of a “compulsory heterosexuality,”⁵¹ which marginalized GLBT identities and violated those who presented this

⁴⁹ Ibid., 168 – 169.

⁵⁰ Butler, “Preface (1999),” in *Gender Trouble*, 1990 (London, UK: Routledge, 2007).

⁵¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London, UK: Routledge, 2007) 153 – 174.

way. By blending gender categories, Butler established how performance could also logically dispel rigid meanings attached to sex and sexuality.

The full depth of Butler's thesis in *Gender Trouble*, to my mind, is encapsulated in her discussion of the experience of Herculine Barbin, whose appearance before the French public subverted dominant discursive categories of sex, gender, and sexuality:

Foucault's introduction to the journals of the hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin suggests that the genealogical critique of these reified categories of sex is the inadvertent consequence of sexual practices that cannot be accounted for within the medicolegal discourse of naturalized heterosexuality. Herculine is not an "identity," but the sexual impossibility of an identity. Although male and female anatomical elements are jointly distributed on this body, that is not the true source of scandal. The linguistic conventions that produce intelligible gendered selves find their limit in Herculine precisely because she/he occasions a convergence and disorganization of the rule that govern sex/gender/desire. Herculine deploys and redistributes the terms of a binary system, but that very redistribution disrupts and proliferates those terms outside the binary itself.⁵²

Here, Butler's politics of performance showed how the disruptive aspects of Herculine's self-presentation interrupted the meaning of public discourse. To the extent that gender presentation happened for Herculine, it was a fundamentally nonreferential process because claims to a preexistent identity were unstable and the self was in the process of being made. By breaking with norms of gender and sex, the meaning of Herculine's disclosure was negotiated in a recursive fashion between: 1) a conditional, provisional self; and 2) dominant cultural-linguistic meanings and grammatical conventions. Broadly conceived, *Gender Trouble* showcased queer recourse against the heteronormative imposition of masculine and feminine modes of identification. With her discussion of Herculine, we see how Butler additionally articulated plural visions of sex and sexuality.

In a simplification of her thought, Butler expressed how gender was produced in action, not given by nature. As an iterated practice, performativity in *Gender Trouble* related a theory of agency that showed how identity was nonreferential insofar that it could not draw upon a

⁵² Ibid., 32.

preexisting subject as agent.⁵³ Instead, actions of self-presentation produced gender, sometimes replicating the violence that enforced heterosexual terms of gender identification and sometimes transforming the social meaning attached to our understanding of the relationship between sex and gender. The notion of “performative subversions” in *Gender Trouble* spelled Butler’s non-sovereign understanding of agency: not only were subversive acts of gender presentation compelled by the fact of pluralism, but people could neither control the unbounded effects of their self-presentation (through their bodies and through their speech), nor could they fully choose what (and who) was communicated to others in their public appearance.⁵⁴

Introduced as a theme in *Gender Trouble*, Butler’s politics of performance as a transformative route toward freedom begs our understanding of what happens in drag. Is the gender identity of the drag actor antecedent to the performance or produced on stage? Butler does not think that reality is drag, instead she indicates how disruptive these performances are to the ways that we understand the constitution of gender, sex, and sexuality. Since drag transcends pervasive conceptions of sex and gender, these performances can potentially refashion understandings of sex and gender in an emancipatory way. In analyzing drag, Butler’s politics of performance reiterates Arendt’s standpoint that our received knowledge about sex and gender presented in drag is unstable: trying to “know” the objectivity of the truth represented in drag is theatrical in its own right. When we see drag performed, our participation in viewing it (or thinking about it) makes it difficult to occupy an epistemological position that could verify the truth of what we perceive. This means drag positions actors and spectators in dramatic relations of interaction, meaning that political judgment, not truth-verification, is the perceptual dynamic

⁵³ Ibid., 196.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 107 – 193.

that exists between actor and spectator.⁵⁵ Like Arendt, Butler describes that our proximity to drag as actors or spectators invariably introduces a perspectival understanding of it.

In her criticism of Arendt, Butler has said of her argument in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) that it functioned to “curb the occasional voluntarism of my view of performativity without thereby undermining a more general theory of agency.”⁵⁶ Thus, she qualified interpretations of what the performance of gender identity meant in in *The Psychic Life of Power*. If this later work is understood as a caveat to *Gender Trouble*, we see how it also pushes back against the more voluntaristic account of agency found in Arendt in favor of a psychoanalytic theory of it. Butler’s primary point is that the *vita activa* is only a part of the story of how selves are constituted; there is also an internal drama of self-formation that happens in the psyche. Perhaps, Butler’s correction in *The Psychic Life of Power* should be understood as getting the practice of performance offered in *Gender Trouble* right. In some ways this challenges Arendtian inaugural acts, but if we synthesize Butler across her relevant publications, we see a certain replication of the basic ontological position offered by Arendt. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler excavates how our being in the world and our relations to social others influences our presentation of gender, whereas in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler places the emphasis on how our relationship to ourselves also refines a general portrait of agency.

In this light, we can see how Arendt might agree with the fact that while action has *intersubjective* elements it also has *intrasubjective* elements, but in Arendtian politics freedom emerges first and foremost from our relations with others, not from relations that we have to ourselves. This perhaps represents a serious departure between Arendt and Butler: Arendt

⁵⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London, UK: Routledge, 2007); Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵⁶ Butler, “Preface (1999),” in *Gender Trouble*, 1990 (London, UK: Routledge, 2007) xxvi.

prioritizes how our relations to others make us aware of freedom whereas Butler equalizes the balance between the internal and external landscapes that dramatize feelings of power, agency, and self-respect. Most poignantly, however, both philosophical statements recognize how agency is reflexively constituted in our relations with others and in our relationship to ourselves.

Perhaps, the most irreconcilable disagreement between Arendt and Butler pertains to how the materiality of the body implicates the speech act. In *Bodies that Matter* and *Excitable Speech*, Butler argues that the union of Arendtian words and deeds misunderstands the performative role of the body in actualizing freedom. According to Butler, communication actually has corporeal beginnings: words as linguistic conventions are a function of bodily capacities. Moreover, Butler simply argues that the speech act is performed by a body, one that has certain ways of being that colors how it is understood. Consider, for instance, how embodied voices register different pitches, not only as a matter of choice but also as a matter of phonal capability, and how the sound of voices implicate the speech act.⁵⁷ Thus, Arendt's relegation of substantive bodies to an apolitical zone is not only inaccurate in Butler's mind, but it deeply problematizes how the union of words and deeds is conceived. The speech act, Butler says, prefigures the materiality of the body and relies on its performative gestures to pronounce words and execute deeds. *Contra* Arendt, Butler is correct in excavating the embodied aspects of communication.

The disagreement between Arendtian action and *The Psychic Life of Power* can be more narrowly cast. In this juxtaposition, the interpretive tension between Butler and Arendt arises as

⁵⁷ The range of pitches that the human voice can phonate has limitation. Certain women have the vocal range and phonal capabilities to be classified as a tenor, bass, or baritone. If a woman wanted to register the low pitches that would qualify her as a female contralto or male tenor, sometimes it is the case, that she cannot create these pitches. The same observation about men and their phonal capacities would hold true. This example leaves aside the intriguing yet controversial issue of how singing voices become classified by gender; musicologists are seriously divided on the issue for obvious political reasons.

a problem of knowing to what degree our activities belong to us and are not attributable to some other source of power. Butler maintains that our agency is invariably tied to other forms of power, constricting our true capacity for free action. On this point, she states: "...the subject emerges both as the effect of prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency."⁵⁸ This is why she believes that the agency "exceeds the power by which it is enabled."⁵⁹

One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs.⁶⁰

Here, Butler confirms Arendt's description of human agency as contingent and relational. More importantly, we see that Butler's definition of human agency as a "reversal to the power that makes it possible" parallels Arendt's idea that individuals act against preexisting operations of power. Interpreting the boundaries between subject and agent in Butler is not an exact science, but when she employs the language of a subject, she narrates an internal drama of violence that results in the production of a moral conscience, whereas in employing a language of an agent, she concentrates upon the external dynamics of public discourse.⁶¹ This observation helps solve the problematic of power and agency in Butler's theory, but more precisely, she argues that an agent is knowable through her resistance. Even though resistance against prevailing modes of social domination does not move beyond the fact that subject-formation happens within a vacuum of power, these performances have the potential to ground the conditions for self-respect.⁶²

⁵⁸ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 14 – 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Krause, "Freedom, Power, and Political Action," Brown University, Fall 2012.

⁶² Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 83 – 106.

Resistance as Agency: Psychological Motivations for Action and the Revision to Rationalism

The psychological motivations that explain conditions for agency in Butler's view offer an explicit critique of intellectual explanations that attribute rationality to all human behavior and actions.⁶³ Butler's approach discredits the rationalist depiction of human behavior exposing how our actions have features that are not rationally selected; she identifies how these *non-rational* elements and impulses often transcend our own consciousness.⁶⁴ In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she emphasizes how our activities in the world rely upon psychological determinants. In her final assessment, however, she directs us to the fact that resistance is about gaining knowledge of your own agency. Resistance, she explains, is about gaining conditions of self-respect. Butler indicates that self-respect has to do with our own knowledge of ourselves as agents, an awareness that can take shape in the midst of varying levels of conscious awareness about our attachment to others. Power can exploit us without our knowledge of it, but ultimately Butler carves out the theoretical space for how we might begin to realize our agency in the midst of power. She thinks we gain verification of our capacities as effective agents through the interplay between our psychological selves and our social selves. Butler wants us to see that human behavior has both an interior and exterior dimension, but like Arendt, she acknowledges how both spheres co-constitute knowledge of ourselves as effective agents.⁶⁵ Even though the psychological interiority of the mind represents a space constructed through power in Butler's view, she also argues that performative resistance, geared toward political relations in the world, can reformulate knowledge of ourselves as effective agents (in other words, as holding power).

⁶³ Butler would agree with the antirationalist bent of this paper in thinking that the specification of human cognition as narrowly strategic in its functional capacities is misguided.

⁶⁴ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 1 – 82.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

For Butler, resistance is not something to be avoided, and it can sometimes facilitate greater understanding of the self. More precisely, she writes that transgressive acts have enabling qualities that extend beyond their success or failure in procuring interests. An *affective* sense of power is intertwined with power itself. Drawing upon Nietzsche, Butler reiterates his paradoxical observation about the construction of the individual psyche and its desiring postures: our desire to be capable agents sometimes demands that we act against ourselves (and do violence to the enabling power that has produced us). Butler asks: how can it be that *in turning back against* the constitutive powers of the self, we might gain awareness of ourselves as agents instead of merely subjects? Butler wants to get outside of the recursive problem of power that appears in its enabling and disabling effects, but in affirming transgression and resistance as agential she implies Nietzsche's realization about the influence of the *feeling* of power upon power itself. In this retreat from her critical engagement with Nietzsche, she imagines that political contestation may in fact enable great human achievements.

The feeling of effective agency – of power – can only be accessible when individuals are able to resist what they perceive as limitations to their choices as well as barriers to their further development. While her interpretation of Nietzsche is unclear at points, Butler seems to agree with him in thinking that humans are moved to action in their overriding necessity for expression, which might, in fact, be facilitated with an experience of resistance. In resistance, Butler suggests that we find a method of gaining knowledge of our own power and influence in the world. Resistance not only shows us how we can be effective agents, but in the performance of protest, we gain an *affective* sense of our power. This feeling of power may further enable other reasons that we have for being agential.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ This insight is derivative from Nietzsche. The feeling of power in Nietzsche is a purely subject-relative concept mediated in social-psychological terms; it defies objectivity in a way that a strict evaluation of power

A Synthesis Between Arendt and Butler?

There exists a possible reconciliation between Arendtian ideas of human agency and Butler's argument that subordination constitutes the subject. The coalescence is possible if we see that the Arendtian framework for human agency acknowledges that no single human can escape the fact of power nor "deliver and save"⁶⁷ humans from its pathological tendencies. Similar to Butler, Arendt confirms that the determining influence of power is antithetical to human impulses, and performance always happens "within and against" these configurations of power: "It is in the nature of the automatic processes to which man is subject, but within and against which he can assert himself through action, that they can only spell ruin to human life."⁶⁸ Arendt's oblique remarks about how power may in fact constitute the psychological subject does not eliminate Butler's standpoint. If Arendt thinks that automatic forces might encompass the psycho-biological forms of domination that Butler narrates as central to subjectification, the polarization of the theoretical views does not seem correct. But, can the distance between Arendt and Butler be reconciled so easily?

With her explication of agency as transgression, Butler views performance as activating the psychological conditions necessary for a sense of expression that exceeds the power that constitutes the subject. This certainly seems to allow for a complementary theoretical view of Arendt and Butler, which suggests a further synthetic understanding: bringing together the views, we might hold that political life is performative in its basic composition. In their respective understandings of performance, the incongruities dissolve between Arendt and Butler. Both forward the idea that within a process of reflexive self-making, one that can never be brought

itself might not. Significantly, he articulates that displeasure may be intrinsic to the activity of gaining psychological understanding of one's capacity for influence in the world.

⁶⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (NY, NY: Penguin, 1977), 167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

under the control of an intentional “I”, the subject-actor gains her provisional, and always incomplete, identity. Paradoxically, this provisional identity is fixed and impermanent – open to revision, yet constative in the political claims it speaks. This makes the subject-actor’s capacity for future action intertwined in the desires of others and theatrical in its radical contingency.

Mahmood’s Theory of Agency: An Embodied Performativity Located in a Cultural Ethos

By imagining how agency relates to freedom outside of liberal secular contexts, Mahmood’s theory of agency frames important normative insights. In her non-sovereign characterization of agency, Mahmood denies ground to both Arendt and Butler in explaining the political consequences of piety within the historical context of the Egyptian mosque movement. During this period of religious activism, Mahmood observes the transformative potential that the Islamic revival held for Muslims, especially for women. Muslims who participated in the mosque movement did not merely re-signify Islamic religious practices through performative engagement, but their actions encapsulated a re-orientation of the ethical self toward forms of desire. Even though participants were not always aware of the resistance or complicity they enacted, their engagement achieved greater self-respect.⁶⁹

By occupying spaces traditionally reserved for the dramatization of male authority, participants in the mosque movement realized a sense of their effective agency without knowledge of either their resistance against patriarchal institutions or complicity in enforcing gender hierarchies. Not only did their participation enable their standing as agents in Egyptian society, but their collective engagement in hermeneutical practices like interpreting the Qur’an enhanced their self-understanding in ways that strengthened their identification as Muslims. Through modalities of action, participants in the mosque movement learned to internally identify

⁶⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005) 32.

with their actions and the localized ethics of Egyptian society: the participants embodied actions that performed the “authoritative discursive traditions”⁷⁰ that empowered them as subjects.

Mahmood’s account of agency is expansive in its scope, localized and contingent, actor-centered in its turn toward practices of the self, yet emblematic of a non-sovereign characterization of agency. Here, the nature of the distribution functions through culture. Of her theory, Mahmood claims:

The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located. The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and they come to measure themselves against the ideal furbished by these traditions; in this important sense, the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts.⁷¹

While her evaluation of Butler and Arendt maintains a critical distance, her argument comprises insights about political performance found in each of their respective frameworks. Namely, Mahmood portrays a reflexive, theatrical politics where discursive processes shape the lived experience of oppressed subjects. In her final assessment, Mahmood overcomes the temptation to understand human agency in polarized descriptions as either free or determined, or as either complicit or resistant against social and political relations of power. Instead, her theory of agency permits a discussion where certain “levels-of-freedom” might be achieved.

In response to Arendt, Mahmood agrees that participants in the mosque movement acted into a web of social relations, and the consequences of their actions were not fully knowable to them. Moreover, Mahmood describes how Muslim women had no means of controlling the chain of events that their ritual practices catalyzed in many mosques across Egypt. Even though Mahmood testifies to the unpredictability of action and to a performative politics, there are many discontinuities with Arendtian thought. Most particularly, the radically free inclinations of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Arendtian inauguration are significantly qualified in Mahmood's portrait of agency. Mahmood instead observes how culture and ethical traditions exist prior to the decisions of actors. Since cultural and language precede the development of the subject in her theory, Mahmood asserts that subjects act within these limitations calling into question possibilities of Arendtian newness (although the ideal of spontaneity still seems to fit with Mahmood's descriptions of how participants in the mosque movement acted and spoke their minds).

One final and important chasm between Arendt and Mahmood appears in the different answers they provide to the question of how bodies implicate freedom. Mahmood's embodied depiction of action contests Arendt's provisions against bodily incursions into politics. Mahmood's estimation about how the body itself animates possibilities for freedom situates her view much closer to Butler's corporeal understanding of the speech act. While Mahmood embraces Butler's template for considering how the subject is the effect of Foucauldian power, she denies thinking about agency as strictly a form of resistance. For example, the practice of veiling can affirm the feminist subject's affirmation of her ethical tradition in ways that defy dichotomies of complicity and resistance. This observation opens up some conceptual distance between Mahmood and Butler that moves us toward thinking about freedom in terms of different levels of achievement.

Indebted to both Foucault and Aristotle, Mahmood's thought resembles each philosophical tradition. Intellectually, Mahmood aligns herself with the belief that custom and habit contribute to ethicopolitical ideas of virtue and authority. In specifying certain performative modalities as ethical mechanisms (like bodily techniques of cleansing, self-grooming, meditation, and ritual prayer), Mahmood supports Foucauldian "practices of the self" as emancipatory routes even in the midst of disciplining forms of power.

These practices are technical practices for Foucault and include corporeal and body techniques, spiritual exercises, and ways of conducting oneself – all of which are “positive” in the sense that they are manifest in, and immanent to, everyday life. Notably, the importance of these practices does not reside in the meanings they signify to their practitioners, but in the *work they do* in constituting the individual; similarly, the body is not a medium of signification but the substance and necessary tool through which the embodied subject is formed.⁷²

By distancing herself from Butler’s idea of performance as practice that resignifies shared terms of social agreement, Mahmood considers how ritual performance of habits can change our orientation toward certain desires. Practices of the self on the self, Mahmood argues, contain the seeds of greater freedom because these techniques produce a more fully formed subject.⁷³ But can the exercise of power on a unanchored self produce a more complete self, which is therefore more agential?

Mahmood’s understanding of the relationship between freedom and agency reiterates many points embedded in Aristotle’s theory of political agency, which turns on the necessity of deliberation, an act which teaches men the importance of making good judgments. Mahmood’s support of core components from *Nicomchean Ethics* explains why performance itself matters to virtue ethics. Since reason in the Aristotelian formulation is partially determined by the habits that we cultivate, Mahmood sees how the participants in the Egyptian mosque movement were able to reflect on their local circumstance, and then more fully form their capacities for good judgments; by adjusting their habits, the participants in the mosque movement were better able to realize their highest aspirations as spiritual people. With the adjustment of their habits, they were better equipped to culturally identify with contemporary Egyptian society.

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⁷² Ibid., 29.

⁷³ In considering whether an agent comes into being from a self-exercise of power upon an unfinished self, Mahmood rhetorically asks: If we might possibly create ourselves, how could this not be empowering?

If the idea of freedom is a self-standing justification for politics, Zerilli argues that our chances for emancipation are going to remain unpredictable and radically contingent. While freedom is going to involve inaugural actions that break with the past and have unpredictable and indeterminate qualities, the boundaries of what freedom entails will remain open and undisclosed until its conditions are produced. This is what Zerilli has in mind when she argues that there is a “paradox of founding that haunts feminism,” meaning that “our concern with a non-sovereign, freedom-centered feminism presses us to ask, if feminine subjects are constituted as subjected...how are they to engage in the free act of founding something new?”⁷⁴ Zerilli indicates that a non-sovereign characterization of agency implies that our idea of freedom is an abyss because we cannot fully know it antecedent to its production.

Since the idea of freedom remains indeterminate in a non-sovereign understanding of agency, Zerilli writes that feminists should focus on being/doing. By trying to achieve consensus about the meaning of the referential subject of “women” performing in feminist models, Zerilli discusses how some intellectual approaches obscure the production of political freedom for women. In establishing her critical distance from Butler, Zerilli states: “...third-wave feminism arrives at an impasse: how to take account of plurality (differences among women) without relinquishing the capacity to act politically.”⁷⁵ In her response to Butler, she delivers a reproach against trying to assess the agential capacities of subjected women:

...thinkers like Butler aspire to a grander politics of freedom than the focus on subjectification and its discontents suggests. Ambivalently beholden to the terms of the subject question, however, they remain tied to a conception of politics that makes agency the condition of any political existence whatsoever. According, the political formation of the “we” in a feminist practice of freedom seems wholly contingent upon *the* subject’s capacity for agency, thus forever returning the subject to the vicious circle in which it plays out the drama of its subjectification.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005) 168.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁶ Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005) 12.

Women, Zerilli insists, will create the constitutive conditions of their political freedom through action. By being/doing, women will produce a provisional subject-actor for feminism capable of enunciating its political claims. Instead of retreating into questions about identity, as well debates about the space for human agency under psychoanalytic theories of subjection, Zerilli's argument tries to present a post-identity feminist view where these questions can remain open instead of closed.

Performance as Political Judgment – “Communities of Taste”

Zerilli supports a certain interpretation of Arendtian politics suggesting how reason is dealt with in her philosophy. She announces that in order to understand the polemical crosscurrents of political feminism one must recognize that many divisions in the movement have resulted from disagreement about what it means to identify as a woman and how that identification should be addressed in politics. “We must first loosen the hold that the entire problematic of validity has on our political thinking or, better, try to imagine, with Arendt again, a different kind of validity – the kind of validity that political judgments should have.”⁷⁷ The performativity of Arendtian political life enunciates that political judgment happens in a analogous ways to judging aesthetically. Zerilli adopts this view suggesting a performative politics of judgment. She thinks acts of political judgment sustain possibilities for freedom. Judgment as a unique faculty of relating to political life performs a critical function and it engages our care for the world. Distinct from verification of truth-claiming, Zerilli's idea of political judgment is like aesthetic judgment because in its performance it upholds, modifies, and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 139.

discards *communities of taste*. These imaginaries denote the contingent boundaries of exclusion and inclusion under modern liberalism.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Ritual performance in politics recasts social meanings and reengages public discourse. Performativity is a practice where there exists the transformative potential for freedom to develop. It entails the notion that the scope of agency is expanded and restricted by viewers.⁷⁹ My discussion of four non-sovereign standpoints establishes how performance is capable of sustaining freedom. Performance as a mode of action and possible route toward emancipation is inconsistent with a view that self-mastery is an ideal of human freedom. Political power that becomes closed to human revision is enslaved in Arendt's account because of a distorted picture of agency as: 1) will-centered; and 2) located in the sovereign individual and its closures of a sovereignty (closures that do not position citizens in an ongoing performative production of legal authority). Because she thinks agency is distributed and indeterminate in its consequences, Arendt argues that the primary task of political institutions should be protecting open spaces where action can unfold and be witnessed by others. If the scope of agency depends partially upon public reception, Arendt's view renders political freedom incompatible with a belief in individualist or isolationist conceptions of human emancipation. In her performative politics, Butler explains how human agency has both internal and external dimensions that influence the development of freedom. While her theory of subjection questions the very idea of free acts, Butler can be understood as complementing Arendt, although discontinuities persist in their formulations of the relationship between agency and freedom.

⁷⁸ While elaboration here might be further clarifying, my central point is that judgment is performative and functions like aesthetic judgment. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005) 124 – 163.

⁷⁹ Krause, "Freedom, Power, and Political Action," Brown University, Fall 2012.

In the views of Mahmood and Zerilli, templates of non-sovereign agency that found freedom through performance further reveal how oppressed subjects can initiate emancipatory projects even in the midst of political coercion and social-psychological conditioning. These accounts provide a balanced picture of agency and a solution to the conceptual distance between polarized readings of Arendt and Butler: agency emerges as neither inaugural in the Arendtian sense nor determined by forms of psychic domination in Butler's sense.

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