

Politics Aestheticized: An Interpretation of Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Action

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The essay tries to provide a new interpretation of Hannah Arendt's political theory from the view point of aesthetic politics. First I explore how Arendt perceives political action as a kind of performing art. Political action, distinct from labor and work, is for Arendt the human capacity to initiate something unexpected and extraordinary. It is invaluable because it can make the world more beautiful with magnificent deeds and words, regardless of considerations of the good and the true. Arendt's aesthetic politics is not only illustrated in her interpreting political action as a performing art, but also in her discussion of the criterion with which we judge human affairs. In the second section, I point out with various evidences that beauty is the supreme value of Arendt's politics. Without beauty, all human enterprise would be futile and no political engagement could become part of our eternal memory. Arendt's attempt to elevate beauty and greatness to be the highest criterion of political action, needless to say, raises the suspicion of moral indifference or nihilism. I examine this problem in section three, arguing that Arendt does try to replace conventional morality with "principles" as the inspiring force of free action. The only two apparent moralities in Arendt's political theory, promise and forgiveness, prove nothing more than the control mechanism inside action itself. Political action is eventually bounded by nothing external. In the final part of the essay I assess the positive and negative sides of Arendt's aesthetic politics. I think Arendt's project is unique in that she tries to aestheticize politics so that a new way of political thinking can appear and respond to the general trend our society is moving along with. Yet I also think her attempt is infeasible because, first, socio-economic problems are excluded from its coverage; and second, its moral ground is too weak to assume the result of boundless action. To resolve these problems, I suggest that, first, social welfare should be juxtaposed with personality revelation as the essential function of politics; and second, morality of ordinary people should be taken into account in the assessment of political action. The modification, to be sure, will weaken the strength and attraction of Arendt's aesthetic politics. But it is the only way to preserve some of her political insights without damaging her originality.

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I. Introduction

This essay is an attempt to interpret Hannah Arendt's thought in terms of what I call an aesthetic political theory. In the past two decades, the enthusiasm in Arendt's political philosophy has been growing steadily. For now we have those who examine Arendt's thought exclusively in the light of her reflection upon totalitarianism (Whitfield, 1980); those who interpret her as a theorist of political action and an explorer of the modern mind (Kateb, 1983); those who focus on her theorization of the mental activity and its political significance (Bradshaw, 1989; Beiner, 1983); and those who review her writings from the standpoint of the Jewish tradition and construct her ideas as an effort to seek a modern solution for the question of Jewish identity (Feldman, 1978). Each of the approaches touches on a certain dimension (or dimensions) of Arendt's political philosophy, and collectively they contribute tremendously to our understanding of Arendt's ideas and their meaning in the modern world. However, what is missing in the Arendtian scholarship is a sense that her political theory is also a highly aestheticized project of politics.

By calling Arendt's political theory an aesthetic politics I want to point out two important characteristics of Arendt's thought. First, Arendt defines politics almost exclusively from the standpoint of beauty, rather than that of truth or goodness. Beauty is the ultimate criterion against which political ac-

tion should be measured. Second, the style of Arendt's theorizing is "artistic" – the metaphors she utilizes, the examples she chooses, and the "logic" she follows, all demonstrate how intimate she assumes the relation between politics and art should be. My first observation concerns the substance of Arendt's political theory; the second, the form of its expression. Together they constitute an aestheticized politics which I think best grasps the spirit of Arendt's political thought.

In this essay I try to substantiate my contention by the following steps. First, I explain how, and why, Arendt regards political action as a kind of performing arts. Second, I demonstrate the arguments that Arendt employs to erect beauty, rather than truth or goodness, or utility as the supreme value of political engagement. Then I discuss the "principles" and the only two apparent "moralities" (i.e., promising and forgiving) of Arendt's political action, and prove that they do not constitute real limitation to the boundless human potential. Finally I render my own estimation of the significance and limitation of Arendt's idea of an aestheticized politics, along with some suggestions as to how it might be modified.

II. Political Action as Performing Art

Action is the pivotal idea of Arendt's political theory. Arendt understands action as the human capacity to begin something new, to initiate a series of events "unexpected" and "infinitely improbable." It is a human potential rooted in the simple fact of natality and corresponding to the human condition of plurality. Distinct from labor, which aims to answer our everyday life necessity, and from fabrication, which builds up a world of use-goods to comfort our temporal stay on the earth, action is the human activity through which man and woman realize their identity as human beings, and reveal their

unique characteristics (HC: 7, 178-79).¹ Arendt thinks that action is the most praiseworthy mold of *vita activa*. It is the *essence* (but not the *nature*, which Arendt rejects) of human existence. Except action and language, nothing — neither reason nor consciousness — distinguishes human beings so clearly from other animal species (CR: 179). Ordinary animals, to be sure, also have life and are capable of behaviors. But animals procreate merely in terms of herd or species, only man can preserve individuality while he is procreated as a member of the human species. Animals behave in accordance with certain patterns, man acts spontaneously and unpredictably. Action is the exclusive prerogative of man.

For Arendt, political action is oriented not toward the true or the right but the beautiful. Politics is the enterprise to beautify the world we inhabit with great words and deeds. It does not need to attune itself to the claim of truth and morality. Truth (be it philosophical truth or historical truth) is incompatible with the political because it is an emblem of universality and necessity, and stands in opposition to plurality and contingency — the values Arendt embraces. Morality is rejected because it cares for personal perfection or salvation more than the existence of a public space. In Arendt's words, it conflicts with the condition of publicity, upon which a secularized modern politics is built. By repelling the interference of truth and morality on the one hand, and elevating beauty as the supreme value of politics on the other hand, Arendt paves the way for a "new science of politics" in which the freedom of human action can be fully realized.

Arendt's aestheticization of political action is detectable, first of all, from her discussion of the *virtù* implied in human performance. Following Machiavelli's assertion, Arendt understands *virtù* as "the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of

fortuna" (BPF: 153). Machiavelli promotes *virtù* as "the specifically political human quality," opposes it to the Christian concept of an absolute goodness, and uses it as a weapon to teach political actors "how not to be good" (BPF: 137). Arendt accepts all the characteristics Machiavelli assigns to *virtù*, and pays emphatic attention to its relation with *fortuna*. What she emphasizes is that *virtù* is a personal attribute which nevertheless exists in the public space only.

According to Arendt, *virtù* (i.e., political excellence) is the Renaissance counterpart of the Greek *arete* and the Roman *virtus*. But while the Greek *arete* implies a concept of "goodness" in the sense of fitness or competence, and the Roman *virtus* implies a strong moral commitment toward one's country, Machiavelli's *virtù* has a somewhat different gravity. It "has neither the connotation of moral character as does the Roman *virtus*, nor that of a morally neutral excellence like the Greek *arete*." Rather, the interplay between *virtù* and *fortuna* is what makes it unique:

Virtù is the response, summoned up by man, to the world, or rather to the constellation of *fortuna* in which the world opens up, presents and offers itself to him, to his *virtù*. There is no *virtù* without *fortuna* and no *fortuna* without *virtù*; the interplay between them indicates a harmony between man and the world — playing with each other and succeeding together (BPF: 137).

Thus defined, *virtù* is necessarily associated with the public realm, with the world where one can excel, and distinguish oneself from all the others. It is never a private, individual property. For the display of *virtù*, the presence of one's peers, whose action and word constitute a viable public space, is always required (HC: 48-49).

Yet, we should also notice that Arendt's *virtù* is a purely aesthetic-

political category. It has nothing to do with truthfulness or goodness in the ordinary moral sense. "Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues," Arendt asserts. Truth is not a political virtue because sticking to the true is essentially a "passive" mode of action. It lacks the positive, assertive strength of initiating something new, of creating a new order or changing circumstances, which marks a political action. Only when a community commits the crime of "organized lying on principle" (as Nazi Germany did) could truthfulness become a political virtue of the first order. But this kind of experience is too rare to justify truthfulness as a viable political factor (BPF: 251). As for morality, Arendt tells us that "conscience is unpolitical" — it is unpolitical because it is interested primarily in personal integrity rather than the world where a crime is or is not committed (CR: 60). Not only this, Arendt even contends that goodness is more often than not destructive of the public realm. Goodness is politically "innocent" and "incapable of learning the arts of persuading and arguing" which constitutes the very substances of political life (OR: 87). Under most circumstances, the effort to make goodness manifest in public would only end "with the appearance of crime and criminality on the political scene" (OR: 96-99).² "[T]he Greek agonal spirit [which Arendt's notion of action pursues] did not know any 'moral' considerations but only an *aei aristeuein*, an unceasing effort always to be the best of all" (BPF: 67). Political virtue, though not identical with the Greek spirit, should confirm the honorable aspiration for distinction and its disregard for conventional morality.

In Arendt, *virtù* is the only legitimate criterion of political action. When a political act is freely performed, its sole significance lies in the display of the actor's *virtù* before the eyes of his friends and enemies. The courage Achilles demonstrated in deciding to fight in spite of his foretold death is the paradigm of *virtù* for all political actors. *Virtù* is the magnificent, beautiful visual effect

of a succinct gesture when the light of the whole world's attention is cast over it. For this reason, Arendt thinks the meaning of *virtù* is best rendered by "virtuosity," that is, "an excellence we attribute to the performing arts" (BPF: 153). The virtuosity of performing arts is distinguished from the value of creative arts in that it lies in the performance itself, not in an end product which outlasts the activity and becomes independent of it.

Quite imaginably, for Arendt, the Renaissance *virtù* is analogous in spirit to the ancient Greek concept of *praxis*. Arendt says, the reason why the ancient Greeks always use such metaphors as flute-playing, dancing, healing, and seafaring to distinguish political action from other activities is exactly that virtuosity is the key element of these activities. Politics, like seafaring or healing, does not aim at producing something tangible, but regards as its achievement the "well-doing" of the political activity itself. Even if we, following the conventional usage, describe the state as a "product" of political action, this "product" is not an independent existence like a product of making, but depends utterly upon further acts to keep it in existence. Therefore, to say "politics is an art" is in fact to conceive of it as a kind of performing arts (Ibid).

To fully understand the non-productive nature of political action, we should examine Arendt's interpretation of Aristotle's idea of *energeia* and see how this interpretation helps her reinforce the "action as performing art" thesis.

Aristotle's notion of *energeia* ("actuality") designated all activities that do not pursue an end and leave no work behind, but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself. It is from the experience of this full actuality that the paradoxical "end in itself" derives its original meaning; for in these instances of action

and speech the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process but is imbedded in it; the performance is the work, is *energeia* (HC: 206).

For Arendt as well as for Aristotle, political activity is exactly one of the “sheer activities.” Political action does not pursue anything other than the “well-doing” of the action itself. It is moved not by calculation of consequences, but by considerations of “how” the performance can achieve the greatest “excellence of appearance in the community” (HC: 207; LM2: 60). The Machiavellian *virtù* — the display of virtuosity in front of the odds of the world — and the Aristotelian *energeia* — the end-in-itself characteristic of pure activity — converge nicely in Arendt’s concept of political action as performing art.³

By depicting political action as a performing art rather than creative (or productive) art, Arendt brings our attention again to her distinction between action and fabrication. Arendt has been emphasizing that political activity should not be mistaken for an activity of fabrication — be it Platonic state-building according to an ideal blueprint or Marxian proletarian revolution embodying the law of history. The “fabrication” perception is wrong because it implies that we know the final destiny of humanity, that we are entitled to the use of violence, if necessary, and the unlimited application of a means-ends category in human affairs.⁴ Now that political action is characterized by Arendt as performing art, the difference between “making” and “doing” becomes even more manifest. Political action is a performing art in the sense that both have their intrinsic meaning in the act or the performance itself. The creative arts, on the contrary, produce something tangible and reify human thought to such an extent that the product obtains an independent existence

of its own, and becomes more valuable than the artists themselves. Political action is not this kind of art. As a matter of fact, politics is “the exact opposite” of it (BPF: 153). Both the performing arts and the creative arts, to be sure, have the same effect of making the world we live in more beautiful, but it is only when the agent can reveal who he is at the same time he creates a work of art, and is not overwhelmed by his product, does the beauty he adds to the world become meaningful.⁵ The existential revelation of an agent is always an indispensable part of Arendt’s aesthetic politics.

III. The Beautiful and the Glorious

Arendt’s aesthetic politics is not only illustrated in her interpreting political action as performing art, but also in her discussion of the criterion with which we judge human affairs. Both explicitly and implicitly, Arendt assumes that the human world can be perceived from the standpoint of either necessity, or utility, or beauty. But insofar as the meaningfulness of a human life is concerned, there is only one choice — that is, to approach the world with the criterion of beauty. The following is a demonstration of Arendt’s arguments on this thesis according to their increasing force of persuasion.

First, as early as the opening pages of *The Human Condition*, when she begins to discuss the term *vita activa* in light of Aristotle’s philosophy, Arendt consistently translates the Greek *kalos* into “beautiful” rather than “fine,” “noble,” or “right,” as this word’s multiple meanings indicate and other translators might have rendered. The Aristotelian classification of the three ways of life, says Arendt, “have in common that they were concerned with the ‘beautiful,’ that is, with things neither necessary nor merely useful.”⁶ The life of entertainment “consumes” the beautiful; the life of political participation “produces beautiful deeds” with the citizen’s excellence; and the life

of the philosopher is devoted to the “contemplation” of things eternal, whose “everlasting beauty” can neither be brought about by sensual enjoyment nor political participation (HC: 12- 13). To insist on translating a foreign term into some specific word may be of merit, but Arendt’s choice reveals how she tries to avoid the possibly moral implications of the term (the “fine,” the “right”), and how she believes that the human life should be concerned with the beautiful. Still, this is only an indirect indication of what Arendt really wants to say.

What Arendt wants to say, recalling her division of labor/work/action, is that each kind of activity pursues as its end the promotion of certain value. The activity of laboring aims at maintaining our biological life by answering the need of metabolism. The activity of working means to produce useful artifacts that can enrich the habitat of people during their life on earth. While the activity of acting and speaking — the *vita activa par excellence* — is the only activity devoted to the creation of things beautiful and glorious. By leaving behind great stories worthy of memory and admiration, acting people prove that the standard of human life “can be neither the driving necessity of biological life and labor nor the utilitarian instrumentalism of fabrication and usage” (HC: 173-74). The meaning of an authentic human life, as Arendt’s argument strongly suggests, is to conduct our activities in accordance with the standard of beauty.

Finally, the most forthright and powerful argument of Arendt’s aesthetic politics arises when she reflects upon the transitory nature of political action.

Seen against the background of political experiences and of activities which, if left to themselves, come and go without leaving any trace in the world, beauty is the very manifestation of imperishability. *The fleeting greatness of word and deed can endure in the world to*

the extent that beauty is bestowed upon it. Without the beauty, that is, the radiant glory in which potential immortality is made manifest in the human world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure (BPF: 218, my italics).

Here, Arendt not only declares that beauty is the justification of political activities, but explains why it is. In her reasoning, political action — the exchange of deeds and words — is possible only in a public space where they can appear and be seen. And the world of appearance must be perceived and judged according to the criterion of beauty because that is exactly what appearance demands (BPF: 219). Neither morality nor utility counts as much as beauty in a public space where perception and being-perceived constitute the major concern. Political activity is the display, and confirmation, of the beautiful.

To say that politics is the display of the beautiful is still a little abstract. Maybe a more concrete way of understanding it is to say that politics is the pursuit of the great. For Arendt, who at this point follows Aristotle again, greatness and beauty are two sides of the same coin. In a dramatic acting plot, greatness and beauty compose the essential moment because both bring the audience “into the extraordinary” (HC: 205, n. 33). The Greeks exalted outstanding action of their heroes for the courage or the wit they demonstrated, regardless of their success or failure. This is the prototype of Arendt’s vision of the great and the beautiful. “[T]he innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word is independent of victory and defeat Unlike human behavior — which the Greeks, like all civilized people, judged according to ‘moral standard,’ taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other — *action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness* because it is in its nature to break through the

commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary” (HC: 205, my italics). For Arendt, motives and aims are the external factors of an act. They might be pure, praiseworthy, or grandiose; but they are never “unique.” They differ only to the extent that they can be attributed to different types of persons. What Arendt cares about, in contrast, is “the specific meaning of each deed,” which lies in the performance itself and radiates when the agent aspires to the extraordinary (HC: 206).

Arendt’s anti-teleological, anti-utilitarian propositions reinforce her aesthetic politics to such an extent that we can even call her political theory a “politics of the extraordinary” or “politics of exceptions.” In great contrast to what American structuralists (such as Theda Skocpol) and the French *Annales* school (such as Fernand Braudel and E. Le Roy Ladurie) believe, Arendt maintains that the real meaning of everyday relationships is disclosed “not in everyday life but in rare deeds, just as the significance of a historical period shows itself only in the few events that illuminate it” (HC: 42).⁷ In her opinion, structural force is an imagined obsession of Marxist intellectuals, it never exists or functions as the structuralists believe. The dynamics of history lies in living persons — in their unique perception of the environment and their unique way of dealing with the challenges. Everyday life such as drink and food, dress and housing — with which the *Annales* are most concerned — is not what makes history meaningful or understandable. Rather, the real thread of history is the chain of a series of unexpected events. The 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the 1988 Chinese Democratic Movement, and the 1989-90 collapse of the Soviet Communist block should have taught the structuralist a valuable lesson as to how the apparently impossible can become possible.

The politics of exceptions, though not necessarily, tends to have a taste for heroism. In the Homeric epoch, greatness is recognized as “a heroic con-

tempt for all that merely comes and passes away, for all individual life, one's own included" (BPF: 52). Achilles's intrepidity before the threat of death exemplifies a portrait of greatness. On other occasions, greatness is illustrated in the hero's (or heroine's) capacity for "finding the right words at the right moment." The last lines of *Antigone* tells us how human beings can reply with "great words" the great blows of fate (HC: 25-26). In the period of the *polis*, Arendt continues, the candidacy for greatness "shifted from action to speech, and to speech as a means of persuasion rather than the specifically human way of answering, talking back and measuring up to" the blows of fate. This shift enables the Greek statesmen, the most talkative ones in the most talkative body politic ever found, to seek glory and greatness, and strive for immortality (HC: 26; BPF: 47).⁸ Inspired by these examples, Arendt asserts that action, politics, and glory are inextricably united. "Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm" (HC: 180). In other words, politics is the enterprise of heroes, not in the sense that only heroes can afford political action, but that whoever dare themselves to meet the challenge of self-revelation are entitled to the crown of heroes.⁹

Before we finish our discussion of Arendt's argument for the beautiful and the glorious, it is appropriate to ask how Arendt would deal with the popular conviction that politics and aesthetics are essentially hostile to each other. As Arendt acknowledges, we usually regard the artist as the creator and protector of eternally beautiful things because the artist is the only one who perceives of the things without consideration of function and utility. The politician, by contrast, is the least trustworthy person in this regard because politics is the hotbed of philistinism and vandalism (BPF: 217). Arendt agrees that

the conventional belief has merit as long as politics is understood exclusively in terms of a means-and-ends calculation, that is, in terms of the activity of fabrication. But Arendt has demonstrated, or tried to demonstrate, that fabrication and calculation are not the essence of politics. If we replace means-and-ends with Arendt's action-in-itself as the substance of political activities, the conflict between politics and the aesthetic would disappear immediately (BPF: 217-18).

Moreover, Arendt argues that "art and politics, their [ostensible] conflicts and tensions notwithstanding, are interrelated and even mutually dependent" (BPF: 218). They are compatible not merely because their "products" (poetry, paintings, and music on the part of artists, speech and deed for the politicians) share the same need of a public realm for presentation, but also because both of them repudiate truth and morality as the criterion of sound judgment in their respective fields. "Culture and politics," says Arendt, "belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision" (BPF: 223). In the world of appearance, there is no ultimate, eternal standard for what is good or bad, what is beautiful or ugly. Every decision is a temporary agreement among equals which results from numerous judicious exchanges of opinions and patient persuasion. It is the attribute of "displaying one's taste in a common world" that brings artists and politicians together and eventually justifies Arendt's aesthetic interpretation of politics.

IV. The Principles and the "Moralities" of Political Action

Since Arendt assimilates politics to aesthetics to such a degree, the principles which generate, complete, and limit political action are very different from what we see in conventional politics. At this point, the Machiavellian fla-

vor radiates again in Arendt's political theory. "Action, to be free," maintains Arendt, "must be free from motive on one hand, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other." Although she never says that motives and aims are trivial factors in action, "action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them" (BPF: 151). By saying this Arendt seems to try to separate the constellation of action into two distinct moments: the free moment and the conditioned, determined moment. An act is determined insofar as it is guided by an anticipated goal whose desirability the intellect has first grasped and then called upon the faculty of will to execute it. On the other hand, the same action could also show its freedom if we appreciate it to be "neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will," but springing from something Arendt calls "principles" (BPF: 151-52).

The principle Arendt talks about is not a moral principle in the common sense. It is rather an inspiring force which comes to one from outside, general in nature and universal in validity. It differs from motives in that motives operate from within the self; while principles, like something with objective value, inspire from without. For instance, when a political actor does something "for the sake of" honor, but not "in order to" gain fame for himself, the principle of honor is manifested. Second, a principle is distinct from a goal in that any specific goal (e.g., the defeat of the Nazi Germany) can be accomplished and thereby disappear; while a principle (e.g., the love of peace) can be repeated time and again — it is "inexhaustible" (BPF: 152). Like the *beginning* of an *act*, which for Arendt is a repetitive expression, a principle is the fountain that an act derives its validity from, and the guiding leitmotif that would save action from its inherent arbitrariness (OR: 212-13).¹⁰

Specifically speaking, Arendt gives the following examples of what constitutes a principle in her mind: honor or glory, love of equality, distinction

or excellence, and fear or distrust or hatred (BPF: 152). Among these model principles the aspiration for distinction seems to occupy the leading place. Whether it is the Greek version of agonal spirit (“always strive to do your best and to be the best of all”) or the American founding fathers’ “passion for distinction” which John Adams held to be the most essential human faculty, the principle of excellence serves as the chief political virtue in Arendt’s political philosophy and generates almost all other important virtues related to action.¹¹ For her, the desire to excel not only drives people into public business, but makes them “love the world and enjoy the company of their peers.” Conversely, if there exists only thirst and will to power and no regard for excellence, political life would be destroyed in no time after the political vice of power struggle become prevalent (OR: 119- 20).

As we mentioned earlier, Arendt’s “principle” is not a moral category like the term “a man of principle” indicates. Honor, courage, and distinction may be counted as moral principles under certain circumstances. But under other circumstances they are not moral at all. As for “fear or distrust or hatred,” even the most open-minded moral theorist would find it difficult to classify them as “moral” principles. Basically what we can say about Arendt’s principles is that they are morally neutral, or morally irrelevant. Arendt creates this concept to support her description of political action as an agent-revealing activity, in contrast to motive-goal determined activity. The distinction between acting-on-principle and action determined by motives and goals has its origin in the tradition of German philosophy — one can find a similar contrast in Kant’s moral theory or in Jaspers’s idea of unconditional action, to name just a few. But while Kant and Jaspers still believe action of principle is morally or religiously inspired, Arendt does not (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1991: 458-59). In order to maintain consistency in her aesthetic concept of political action,

Arendt seems ready to get rid of any moral residue that might mitigate the dramatic effect of a glorious performance.

However, to say that Arendt's idea of political action is not bounded by motives and goals is not to say that it is bounded by nothing. As a matter of fact, after repudiating the role of conventional morality in politics, Arendt does erect some other limitations, or remedies, to prevent action from producing arbitrary, chaotic results. These new "moral precepts" are: the readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, the faculty to make promises and to keep them (HC: 237, 245). In Arendt's mind, forgiving and promising differ from conventional moralities in many significant ways. First, they are strictly political moralities, not religious or philosophical precepts. That is to say, they must be generated from considerations related to political affairs, and applied to the political sphere only. Second, they are based on the human condition of plurality. Unlike those concerned only with the perfection of one's soul, these moralities arise directly "out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking." Third, in contrast to any precept coming from an absolute authority above or external, Arendt's political morality derives its validity from the simple fact of people being together. It denies any limitation which is transcendental or vertical (HC: 237-38, 245- 46; CR: 92).

The two (and the only two) moralities are results of Arendt's reflection upon the nature and problems of political action. Positive and indispensable as it may be, Arendt admits political action has three inherent predicaments: the unpredictability of its outcome, the irreversibility of its process, and the anonymity of its agent (HC: 220). The last predicament — the easiness of being-forgotten because of the transitory nature of action and speech — can be addressed by the help of artists, by those who reifies the story as well as the actors into a permanent painting, or music, or sculpture. Yet the first

two problems are so overwhelming that one cannot but doubt if there is any remedy which can successfully deal with them without fundamentally altering the boundless characteristic of action. To solve this difficulty, Plato, who in this regard remains the greatest pioneer throughout the Western tradition, suggests to substitute “action” with “making” as the key concept of political enterprise – to replace the unpredictable process of argument, persuasion, and compromise with the controllable philosopher-king rulership, in other words (HC: 222-30). Plato’s solution is the archetype of all later utopians whenever they are perplexed by the inherent difficulties of political activities. But Arendt contends it is only an irresponsible escape from “the unexpected” of politics. To introduce “making” into politics and annihilate real action would only bring about more calamities, such as the generalization of the means-ends category, the use of violence, and the identification of sovereignty and freedom (HC: 228-29, 234-35).

For Arendt, the genuine antidote against the irreversibility and unpredictability of political action does not come from any other faculty such as making, but lies exactly in the faculty of action itself. The possible redemption for the predicament of irreversibility is the faculty of forgiving; the solution for unpredictability is the faculty of making and keeping promises. Forgiving serves to undo the mistakes done in the past; promising serves to set up some “isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty” which secure the network of human relationship.

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly

and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart
(HC: 237).¹²

The only moralities of Arendt's political theory, therefore, are not external to the faculty of action itself. They are the "control mechanisms" built into the very capacity to begin something new (HC: 246). In this sense, political action is almost as boundless as it was before the addition of forgiveness and promise.

V. The Problems of an Aesthetic Concept of Political Action

There are many questions we can raise against Arendt's concept of action. To begin with, we have the problem of determining the adequacy of Arendt's etymological analysis of the word itself. Arendt traces the term "action" to its Greek *archein*, which means "to begin," "to lead," and "to rule" (HC: 177). But we are surprised to find that Arendt elaborates the meaning of action almost exclusively on the basis of one connotation – "to begin." The meaning of "leading" and "ruling" disappears from her definition of action. If one is to be faithful to an etymological approach like Arendt recommends, there is no reason why the meaning, and experience thereby, of rulership should be surgically removed from the essence of political action. It seems fair to ask that both "beginning something new" and "ruling" be equally emphasized in a sound, complete understanding of political action.

An unpublished text of Arendt's lecture demonstrates that she is not really ignorant of the second dimension of political activities. She says: "[To define politics as a form of being together where no one rules and no one obeys] is not to deny that interest and power and rule are very important and even central political concepts The question is: Are they the fundamen-

tal concepts, or are they derived from the living-together that itself springs from a different source?"¹³ By this Arendt means there is a priority of mutual revealing to power struggle as the essential characteristic of political action. Genuine politics is about revelation but not domination, to put it simply. But is this a reasonable way to deal with one of the most important phenomena of human interaction? Is this anything other than a game of language in which every concept can be arbitrarily twisted? I doubt the answer to both questions is a "No." We agree that by purging political action of the ugly side Arendt successfully paves the way for her aesthetic project of politics, but the cost is that the concept of politics becomes so purified that it does not fit our common speech at all (Canovan, 1974: 76-77).

The problem of purification is noticed by almost all Arendt's serious critics, among whom Habermas provides us with the most convincing account of why it is wrong. Habermas says: The concept of the political encompasses three distinct phenomena of power — the acquisition and maintenance of political power, the employment of power, and the generation of power. The first corresponds to strategic action, which ever since the inception of modern politics has dominated the concern of political theorists. The second, power employment, is what we used to call "rule." And the last, the one which Arendt exclusively talks about, is action in its Greek sense of *praxis* — it is the origin in which the legitimacy of laws and political institutions is anchored. The contribution of Arendt's political theory, Habermas continues, is her renewal of the third dimension of power. But her mistake is to exclude the element of strategic action and rule from the concept of the political, and therefore "narrow" our understanding of political life (Habermas, 1977: 16-21). We know Habermas is notorious for his frequent mis-interpretation of Arendt's (and other philosophers') ideas, but this time he is right to point out

the “narrowing” problem in Arendt’s thought.¹⁴

Since Arendt deliberately narrows the content of political action, she is able to assert the beauty of politics only at the price of neglecting socio-economic problems which are inextricable from strategic or instrumental concerns. Again, this is a big problem in Arendt’s concept of action that many commentators have noted. Bernstein, for instance, articulates the complaints of those who feel dissatisfied with Arendt’s aesthetic project of politics when he says “our problematic is one in which the social and the political are inextricably connected.” Arendt should admit, he says, that “any attempt to solve the ‘political’ question, any attempt to achieve genuine political freedom that ignores the social question or turns its face away from the question of social poverty and misery, is doomed to failure” (Bernstein, 1977: 157; Habermas, 1977: 15-16; Thompson, 1969: 655, 659; Jay, 1978: 352-53; Canovan, 1974:79). I think it is appropriate to assume that most political activities are motivated by socio-economic considerations. And others are frequently stimulated by religious or moral conviction — if we do not count the overlap. Although with the unfolding of political interactions people may experience “public freedom” and “public happiness,” there is no reason to suppose that the desire for revelation and distinction is the only or the primary dynamic of historical events. We appreciate Arendt’s effort to reserve a space for purely existential-aesthetic political engagement, which indeed happens in extraordinary occasions. We also concede that when this kind of moment comes, human dignity and greatness shines off, overshadowing all considerations of morality or instrumentality. However, we find it difficult to use this exceptional experience to define politics, cleansing it of routine administration and socio-economic deliberation which usually serves as the prerequisite for the pursuit of freedom. Arendt’s one-sided promotion of the existential-aesthetic dimension of politics, if car-

ried to its logical conclusion, is as inadequate and dangerous as the one-sided real-politics has been.

One of the “dangers,” as Hanna Pitkin skillfully points out, is the “curious emptiness of content characterizing Arendt’s image of the public sphere.” Since both socio-economic concerns and conscience-prompted arguments are excluded, the actors can prove their “greatness” only by abstract, pointless speech. They may not, as Pitkin quips, behave like “posturing little boys clamoring for attention (‘Look at me! I’m the greatest!’ ‘No, look at *me!*’)” (Pitkin, 1981: 337-38), but surely they will feel that, without concrete issues or policy to address, the talk is very likely to become empty and wasteful of time. Perhaps they can still talk about political freedom, exchange opinions about those things which Arendt says “we cannot figure out with certainty,” yet this kind of political discussion is “almost like a leisurely academic seminar,” and has nothing to do with anybody’s real concern (Parekh, 1982:19-20).

In addition to the “emptiness” problem (which comes from the narrowing and purifying of the concept of the political), we find the moral crisis which Arendt’s aesthetic politics effects is more serious than she likes to admit. Arendt repeatedly argues that free action does not need to take morality into account, and that an act can be measured only by the criterion of greatness. What she does not realize is that the characteristics of her “free action” bears a striking resemblance to that of the Nazi totalitarianism, a crime she severely castigated in her earlier days. According to Arendt, action is not a utilitarian or pragmatic activity; it is the human capability to break through the process of nature by great, magnificent endeavor. Action supersedes specific motives and purposes; it can be judged only by the extent it actualizes the principle which prompts it from the outside. Action is basically boundless — except courage, honor, promise and forgiveness, it does not need to be con-

cerned with other moral creed. To one's surprise, all the features listed above look extremely like Arendt's portrayal of the totalitarian movement. Totalitarianism, Arendt told us, was characterized by its "contempt for utilitarian motives" and "neglect of material interests." Its followers as well as its leaders were determined to achieve "great things." They knew how to sacrifice because they did not have "the lust for power." Among the Nazis, moreover, they had their own "code of honor" to which they committed themselves to observe (OT: 417-19). Of course we know there are other features — such as "peace" and "the love of the world" — which substantially distinguish Arendtian action from totalitarian deed, but we are shocked by the fact that both share so many "*aesthetic*" characteristics.¹⁵ The disturbing resemblance entitles us to ask whether it is totally impossible that political action, envisaged as Arendt does, will one day release its most unexpected, most destructive potential simply because it is bound by so little moral concern.

Again, the "de-moralization" problem in Arendt's aesthetic politics is noted by many scholars. George Kateb warns that Arendt's treatment of political action as a competitive game without considering either absolute or ordinary morality, is "playing with fire" (Kateb, 1983: 32) Ronald Beiner, using Gadamer's criticism of Kantian aesthetics as a prelude, concludes that Arendt also commits the same mistake of "depoliticizing" the idea of *sensus communis* — the result being that some very rich, moral-political content is unduly truncated out of the Rome-rooted idea of community (Beiner, 1982: 136). Hanna Pitkin contends that at least certain concepts of justice should be reincorporated into Arendt's theory of action if it is to avoid "self-defeating" results (Pitkin, 1981: 341, 343).¹⁶ And Seyla Benhabib, based on the appeal for a reconsideration of justice, goes one step further in arguing that "there is a moral foundation to politics insofar as any political system embodies principles

of justice.” Moreover, since “the morally good” should be distinguished from “the morally right” (a distinction she says Arendt did not make), Benhabib thinks it is better to encourage “the cultivation of a public ethos of democratic participation” to serve as the normative foundation of Arendt’s political theory (Benhabib, 1988: 46-48).

The previous series of comments vary in tone and in the focus of their criticism, but they point to a shared opinion: Arendt does not have a concept of morality in her political theory; or, even if she does, the concept is too weak to support the project she desires. Since I agree in principle with the conclusion they arrive at, I would not add any more criticism of Arendt’s aesthetic politics here. Instead, I would like to point out: what Arendt’s problem indicates is not a simple deficiency of moral concerns, but a moral dilemma in which her conscious expulsion of morality and unconscious appeal to morality tie together. To make good my assertion, we need to elaborate what Arendt argues in her last work *The Life of the Mind*.

In her final work Arendt tries to answer the question “Is there any connection between evil-doing and our mental activity?” and, if there is, “What might prevent one from criminality?” Troubled by the criticism made on her report of the Eichmann trial, Arendt is eager to find out what make horrible evil (such as “racial cleansing”) possible. The answer she finds is that evil comes from thoughtlessness – when people abandon the duty of examining themselves on questions of first order, they are liable to accept superficial doctrines and make stupid mistakes. The possible antidote to evil-doing, therefore, is thinking (LM1: 3-5).

For Arendt, the key to the connection between thinking and moral considerations is implied in Socrates’s two propositions. The first reads as follows: “It is better to be wronged than to do wrong.” The second: “It would be bet-

ter for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, being one, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me" (LM1: 180-81). The gist of these statements is that man is an existence of "two-in-one." There is always a dialogue between one and oneself going on in the inner world. We must try our best to keep the dialogue harmonious, otherwise we will lose the balance of self-identification — a result worse than any evil that comes from the outside (LM1: 185).

When Arendt resorts to the inner voice of our mind by asking "who can bear to live along with a murderer?" I think we finally discover the moral boundary of her claimed boundless politics. It is exactly in the question of the inner self that we find Arendt cannot help but suppose some moral standards according to which the murderer is recognized as a murderer, and the right is distinguished from the wrong. There must be certain objective moral standards for one's consciousness to appeal to, otherwise it is pointless to say that the two-in-one dialogue would be able to condition one against evil-doing.

If my understanding is correct, our next question would not be how to ask Arendt to accept a moral system that she has explicitly rejected, but how to persuade her to recognize the existence of the minimum morality in her own philosophy and persuade her to develop it into a greater complex which could save her from the moral plight she falls into without contradicting her intention to establish an aesthetic politics. This, I think, can be done by first modifying her understanding of the so-called moral crisis in the West.

Arendt's incredulity toward traditional morality, in great part, is due to her acceptance of Nietzsche's critique of Platonic-Christian morality. In an unpublished manuscript, she writes: Nietzsche's "abiding greatness" is that

“he dared to demonstrate how shabby and meaningless morality had become” in modern times.¹⁷ Her personal growth experience in the chaos of Weimar Germany reinforces this perception and makes her believe that the inherited standards of the West are really dead (McKenna, 1984:350). But, as George McKenna correctly points out, the premise “that most people in the West no longer live by absolute standards” is a questionable premise to begin with (Ibid). Nietzsche is a prophet of intellectuals. His commentary on the rise, growth, and disintegration of the Western value system was a remarkable observation and anticipation of what the new age might lead people to. The problem, however, is that Nietzsche’s prophecy is mostly valid for intellectuals only. It is accepted by those who, like Arendt, have undergone a serious examination of their own belief in God and traditional values, and found themselves no longer believing in them. But it is not necessarily accepted by, or even accessible to, those who still believe in traditional values in spite of the chaos and confusion the modern world has witnessed. Philosophically speaking, Nietzsche and his followers might be right in predicting how the modern consciousness would evolve. But sociologically, their propositions are beside the point – no matter how fragile theology and metaphysics has become, most Westerners still live by the standards their parents and grandparents believed. The network of morality is not as crumbled as the prophets describe.

Since Arendt’s diagnosis of our moral crisis is somewhat exaggerated, her radical therapy that morality should be severed from politics is at best inadequate, and at worst destructive. Morality, in the sense of a people’s shared standards, customs and manners, has always been one important factor of political life. On certain occasions it is even the primary inspiration for great political action. People fight for freedom because they think slavery and torture are morally wrong. They seek justice for the poor and weak because they

think inequality and discrimination are morally wrong. They maintain a certain law and order in society because they believe murder, robbery, fratricide, incest are morally wrong. No matter what a postmodern deconstructionist would say about the value system of a society, the hard fact is that without a more or less shared standard of what is right and wrong, neither society, nor politics, nor civilization itself would be possible at all. Morality may sometimes become a detrimental force in politics (which Arendt has vividly portrayed in her chronicle of the French Revolution),¹⁸ but it is not always detrimental to politics — sometimes it is even indispensable in the formation of a great politics. Just think of what a role moral indignation played in the Civil Right Movement. Just think of the fact that the most steadfast resisters of the Nazis were men and women who knew nothing of elaborate philosophy but had a simple, stubborn idea about what is morally impermissible. Morality, it seems to me, has been keeping a subtle, complicated relation with politics whose dynamic cannot be easily explained either by an identification, or a separation of the two. Arendt's extreme recommendation of separating morality from politics would only prove as improper as the attempt to impose strict morality upon politics, and create more troubles than it can solve.

As a matter of fact, if Arendt had acknowledged the inevitability of morality in politics, she would have been able to find that the admission of conventional morality into her political theory is not necessarily incompatible with the spirit of an aesthetic politics. The bottom line of Arendt's aesthetic politics, as we alluded to here and there, is to build a peaceful world in which people can enjoy the freedom and happiness of acting in concert. To secure this public space, she emphasizes the significance of the existential-aesthetic dimension of political participation. Yet since politics is a collective enterprise of ordinary men and women, and since ordinary men and women are as a rule subject to

the influence of conventional morality, it is “phenomenologically” inadequate if we, as political theorists, do not take their moral concerns into account. In effect, not only for methodological reasons morality should be seriously considered, but for substantial reasons it also demand an official recognition. *Amor Mundi* (love of the world) is the leitmotif of Arendt’s aesthetic politics. There are many ways to realize one’s love of the world. To affirm one’s worldly existence with dramatic, revelatory speech-act is what Arendt recommends. To affirm the existence of others by taking their values and expectations seriously is what I suggest. It is true that under certain situations the claim of beauty and the claim of morality may conflict; but I believe in most circumstances they are not mutually exclusive. What I ask of Arendt, therefore, is no more than a recognition of the political significance of morality. The inclusion of moral consideration into politics, as well as the integration of instrumentality into politics, will produce more supporting force, rather than more damage, to the original plan Arendt perceives.

VI. Conclusion

Western philosophy, ever since the days of Enlightenment, has witnessed a rise and growth of aestheticism. In Kant’s third Critique, we see the ascendance of the experience of the beautiful and the sublime as an autonomous sphere of philosophy. In Schiller’s “Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man,” art becomes the medium through which humanity and freedom are realized. In Schelling’s and Hegel’s great system of transcendental idealism, the idea of art (or, the “Idea” embodied in art) is the reconciling force of all oppositions between man and nature, between sensuous forms and spiritualization. Nietzsche’s celebration of the Dionysian and his justification of the world in aesthetic terms releases the drive for beauty into the whole domain of philos-

ophy, elevating art (and literature) to be the dominant force of civilization. When Heidegger comes to write his essay on the origin of artwork, beauty becomes one way, presumably the most effective way, in which "truth essentially occurs as unconcealedness." The interweaving of philosophy and literature, the exchange-of-status of logic and poetics, finally arrives at its summit.

I call Arendt's political theory an "aesthetic politics" because I believe her political thinking is tremendously influenced by the aesthetic turn that Western philosophy in general, and German philosophy in particular, takes in the past centuries. What makes Arendt unique in the development, however, is that she tries to bring the aestheticism, not into philosophy only, but into political philosophy. In many senses the aestheticization of politics is a much more difficult task than the aestheticization of philosophy because the transformation of philosophy may involve ideas only, whereas politics is always associated with people's habit, custom, and practice. The greatness of Arendt's political theory, therefore, lies not so much on whether she could succeed in this adventure, as on the fact that she takes the historical step. When the modern age is yielding to the postmodern, Arendt is the first one who tries to construct a new political philosophy which will be able to answer the challenge of the new epoch in which neither truth nor morality are as valid in people's mind as before.

Another unique point of Arendt's aesthetic politics is that it successfully overcomes the elitist tendency characterizing most German philosophers. Nietzsche and Heidegger are the two most powerful minds who stand at the turn of the centuries. But the political implication of their aestheticism is aristocratic in nature. Neither Nietzsche's Zarathustra nor Heidegger's lonely philosopher in the Black Forest is compatible with the political current which dominates the Western hemisphere in our time. Again, it is only in Arendt

that a creative combination of aestheticism and democratic politics begins to appear. Arendt expects everyone (not just the few) to be strong enough to face the reality of the world in which God is dead and Truth is gone. She expects everyone to live an aesthetic, genuine life which Nietzsche supposes only the overman can afford. We have noted that Arendt's aesthetic politics is a politics of the extraordinary because what she asks of the actors is nothing less than heroism. Now it seems clear that she is taking many themes from the "right" wing aestheticism to apply it to a "left" wing politics. The shift of orientation makes her aesthetic politics distinct from that of C. Schmitt, A. Bäumler and many other political theorists in her time. But the question is how feasible the genius design could be.

Judged from our discussion in the previous section, I will say that the chance for Arendt's aesthetic politics to be realized is not very good. It is infeasible because, first, socio-economic problems are excluded from its coverage; and second, its moral ground is too weak to assume the result of boundless action. To resolve these problems, I suggested that, first, social welfare should be juxtaposed with personality revelation as the essential function of politics; and second, morality of ordinary people should be taken into account in the assessment of political action. The modification, to be sure, will weaken the strength and attraction of Arendt's aesthetic politics. But it is the only way to preserve some of her political insights without damaging her originality.

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Notes

1 I will use the following abbreviations when I cite Arendt's work:

BPF: *Between Past and Future*.

CR: *Crises of the Republic*.

HC: *The Human Condition*.

LM1: *The Life of Mind*. Vol. 1, *Thinking*.

LM2: *The Life of Mind*. Vol. 2, *Willing*.

OR: *On Revolution*.

OT: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

2 For a detailed discussion of Arendt's repudiation of truth and morality as standards of political action, see Ch. 2 of my dissertation, Jiang: 1993.

3 It is important to point out that although Arendt refers to Aristotle for the notion of *energeia*, she knows quite well that "Aristotle saw the highest possibility of 'actuality' not in action and speech, but in contemplation and thought, in *theoria* and *nous*." See HC: 206, n. 36.

4 Again, Arendt notes that although Aristotle is the first philosopher to distinguish action (*praxis*) from fabrication (*poiesis*) and assign political activity to the category of *praxis*, he does not consistently sustain this distinction and sometimes thinks of action in terms of fabrication (HC: 195-96).

5 "Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others Action without a name, a 'who' attached to it, is meaningless" (HC: 180-81).

6 The opposition of the beautiful (*kalos*) to the necessary and the useful, according to Arendt, can be found in Aristotle's *Politics* 1333a30ff. Other translators render this passage differently. For instance, Jowett translates

kalos into “honourable;” Carnes Lord translates it as “noble.”

- 7 Cf: Skocpol, 1979:14-18; Braudel, 1979.
- 8 See also LM1: 134: “. [I]n pre-philosophical Greece the great is beautiful and praiseworthy not because it serves one’s country or one’s people but exclusively because it will ‘win eternal mention in the deathless roll of fame.’”
- 9 One of the major difficulties in interpreting Arendt’s political theory, as Leroy A. Cooper rightly points out, is how to differentiate between her “sympathetic interpretation of an essentially Homeric, pre-Platonic stress on extreme individualism” on the one hand, and “her own normative views” on the other. In Cooper’s opinion, many criticisms of Arendt could have been avoided if one had read her writings more carefully and kept the above-mentioned distinction in mind. For this reason, I do not claim, as N. K. O’Sullivan and others do, that Arendt espouses a “romantic cult of heroic individualism,” or accepts unconditionally “the Greek agonal spirit.” Nor would I take Arendt’s discussion of Achilles’s choice of “a short life and premature death” as something she seriously recommends. I do think, however, that Greek heroism is an indispensable source for Arendt’s theorization of political action. Much more importantly, it is undeniable that Arendt does think real politics is the politics of the extraordinary. For Cooper’s comment, see Cooper, 1976:154; for O’Sullivan’s criticism, see O’Sullivan, 1973:184; for my evidence, see HC: 42-43, 205-6.
- 10 For the obscurity implied in Arendt’s distinction between principles and motives, see Kateb, 1983: 12-13; Hinchman and Hinchman, 1991: 457-59.
- 11 Sometimes Arendt contends that courage, rather than the passion for distinction, is the political virtue *par excellence*. “Courage liberates

men from their worry about life for the freedom of the world. Courage is indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake." Without courage, not only "action and speech," but "freedom, would not be possible at all" (BPF: 156; HC: 36, 186-87). However, what Arendt praises courage for is in fact the same thing that she praises distinction for — namely, the pursuit of public happiness and public freedom. To celebrate excellence and to salute courage actually point to the same concern.

- 12 Arendt acknowledges her debt to Nietzsche in discussing the significance of the faculty of promising ("the very distinction which marks off human from animal life"). But in my understanding, Nietzsche's attitude towards promise is basically negative. What is even more interesting in our context, however, is the remarkable similarity between Nietzsche's celebration of "forgetfulness" and Arendt's elaboration of "forgiving." Nietzsche regards forgetfulness as the opposite force of promise — one being made possible through memory; the other, by the repression of memory. Active forgetfulness is for him an indispensable factor to lead a healthy, happy life because it "closes the doors and windows of consciousness for a time, makes room for new things" (Nietzsche, 1968: 36, 493-94). Forgetfulness in Nietzsche, just as forgiveness in Arendt, is an indispensable "virtue" for people to keep living in a common world.
- 13 Cited in Beiner, 1982: 141.
- 14 Habermas's major distortion of Arendt's theory is to translate Arendt's concept of action into his own terminology, and claim that Arendt shares with him the belief in a universal, rational standard of political discussions, which Arendt actually rejects. See Habermas, 1977: 7-9, 21-24. For comment on Habermas's misreading of Arendt see Canovan, 1983: 107-8;

- Luban, 1979: 81-83; Villa, 1992: 717; and Heather and Stolz, 1979: 4-8.
- 15 Commentators who notice the resemblance include Kateb, 1983: 29-30; O'Sullivan, 1973: 198; Heather and Stolz, 1979: 13, and Jay, 1978: 364. See also Pitkin, 1981: 341.
- 16 Pitkin also brings our attention to the fact that for Aristotle, what makes man a political animal is *logos*, and that it is the capability of language which serves to declare "what is advantageous and what is the reverse," and "what is just and what is unjust." The Aristotelian reason for defining man as a political animal disappears in Arendt's philosophy. See 1981: 339.
- 17 Quoted in Kohn, 1990: 117.
- 18 What I am referring to here is "the hunt for hypocrisy," which results in a "reign of terror," not the concern for the poor, which Arendt says is misleading, but I disagree.

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政治的美學化： 試析漢娜·鄂蘭的行動理論

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摘要

本文試圖從「政治學美學化」的角度來詮釋漢娜·鄂蘭的政治行動理論。首先我注意到鄂蘭一再地把政治行動比擬為一種表演藝術。對她來講，政治行動之所以能被當成一種表演藝術，主要是因為兩者同樣以表述技藝之美善為該行為終極意義所在。相形之下，世俗的道德要求或哲學真理就不是政治行動所必須考慮的事。其次，我發現鄂蘭不只視政治行動為表演藝術，並且還認為惟有美才足以使人間事務臻於永恆。偉大的政治行動所體現的對不朽的追求，是人類有異於其他動物汲汲於維持生命或改善生存環境的最大特色所在。當然，由於鄂蘭主張政治行動不應受制於道德考量，所以在行動的原動力上她必須另有一套說法。在第三節中我指出她的說法就是以「原則」取代「動機」，以「承諾」與「寬恕」做為調節行動後果的機制。但是，不論是原則、承諾或寬恕，都不是傳統道德意義下的概念。在最後一部分，我針對鄂蘭美學化政治學的企圖給予某些評價。一方面我認為鄂蘭面對後現代的來臨，嘗試以美的觀點來界定政治，自然與近代德國哲學傳統的演變有關，同時也充分體現她做為一個政治哲學家的原創力。但是由於她對美的過度堅持，以及因此而導致的對社經問題道德考量的輕視，卻又使其理論失之偏頗，非經修改，不足以回應現實政治的種種挑戰。