

Arendt, Heidegger, and the Western Philosophical Tradition

Dana Villa

University of Notre Dame

Abstract/Resumé

Both Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger are famous for their deconstructions of the Western tradition of philosophy (and, in Arendt's case, political philosophy). The paper seeks to tease out the similarities and differences between their approaches to this task. Arendt, while once Heidegger's student, is no mere disciple and it is a disservice to the originality of her thought (as well as its profoundly political character) to characterize her as a "Heideggerian" and to impute to her either the virtues or vices of her teacher. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine Arendt's more straightforward work of political theory—I'm thinking of *The Human Condition*, *On Revolution*, and the essays in *Between Past and Future* in particular—without the background provided by Heidegger's thought. Attempts to do so have tended to emphasize her affiliation with the civic republican tradition in Western political thought. Her affiliation with this tradition is indeed a strong one. However, such readings are for the most part blind to the radical nature of her challenge to the Western philosophical tradition and its profound influence upon the Western tradition of political thought.

I begin by briefly considering the charge made by Arendt's critics that, in her attempt to revivify the Aristotelian concept of praxis, she wrongly attempts to purify this notion of any and all connection to instrumental or social concerns. The idea of a "purified" praxis is indeed central to Arendt's thought, but unless we view this idea against the backdrop of her critique of the tradition, we are bound to misunderstand it. Such misunderstanding is patent among Arendt's critics, many of whom see her concept of action as elitist or aesthetic-existentialist ("dramaturgical") in character, and as lacking any strong normative basis.

Of course, there is some evidence to back up the charges. In addition to her strong distinction between the social and the political, there is Arendt's repudiation of the means/end category (on the one hand) and overtly moralizing approaches to political action (on the other). Action "freed" from instrumental and moral constraints seems to breed *politique pour la politique*—politics for the sake of politics, a notion not all that far from the stance of such "political existentialists" as Carl Schmitt and Hans Freyer.

However, it is only because the critics have forgotten Arendt's depth critique of the tradition—which "institutionalizes," so to speak, an instrumental understanding of political action—that they are able to frame her in these terms. Arendt's project begins with the attempt to get behind the philosophical dis-essencing of political action and (thus) to recover the phenomenological characteristics of action performed in a *public* context defined by the presence of *plural actors* possessed of differing opinions and perspectives. In this attempt, she draws substantially upon Heidegger's "destruction" (*abbau*) of the Western tradition of philosophy, a tradition Heidegger charged with de-temporalizing Being and with covering-over ("forgetting") the "question of Being" or *Seinsfrage* itself.

Arendt is not concerned with the "question of Being" per se. Rather, she sees the tradition (from Plato and Aristotle to Marx and Nietzsche) as plunging action's constitutive dimension of *human plurality* into oblivion. The motive behind this willed forgetting is the desire to escape what Arendt calls the "fragility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome" that attends all action performed in the context of human plurality—that is, in a context defined by the presence and action of other, equal yet diverse, political actors. It was because Plato loathed what he viewed as the anarchy and instability of Athenian democracy that he split the plurality of political actors into *those who know and command* (on the one hand) and *those who execute or do* (on the other). Thus is born the idea of action as the *practical effectuation of the philosophical*, as the essentially instrumental actualization of a notion of justice or community that had been previously spelled out by the philosopher-theorist (who, typically, claimed to be

discovering the “Truth” of justice or community rather than articulating yet one more opinion about the nature of one or the other).

After noting some “methodological” parallels between Arendt’s project and Heidegger’s, I turn to the specification of five elements Arendt views as phenomenologically constitutive of political action. There are, first, the two basic preconditions of all genuine political action: civic equality and human plurality. Second, there is the characteristic *mode* or medium of political action, namely, persuasive *speech* (*peitho* for the Greeks). Third, there is the characteristic *content* of such speech, which Arendt thinks properly concerns the institutions and practices of the public-political realm itself (what we today might call “constitutional” considerations). Finally, there is the pervasive *frailty* of all such action performed in a public realm conditioned by human plurality. Political freedom—the freedom manifest in initiatory action in the public sphere—is never sovereign or “in control,” for the simple reason that the actor always acts in and amongst other actors. Hence, to act is also to suffer, and political action rarely achieves its originally intended goal. It was this later feature of political action that Plato found intolerable, and the reason why he turned to his “expert wisdom” argument and the analogy of the craftsman who first has an idea or blueprint in mind and then (subsequently) sets about realizing it through the (necessarily violent) working-over of some raw material. For the Western tradition of political philosophy, that “raw material” is all too often humanity itself.

For Arendt, the Platonic interpretation of action as a mode of fabrication rules almost the entirety of the Western tradition of political thought. Again and again, whether in Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, or Marx, we encounter the metaphor of the craftsman shaping his material and/or the idea that freedom equals the overcoming of “frailty” and the achievement of some form of mastery or sovereignty. It is here that Arendt comes closest to Heidegger, charging the tradition with pursuing an idea of grounded, “masterly” freedom which is able to rise above all the “futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty” that attends political action in the sphere of human plurality. For Heidegger, the Western tradition of philosophy reduces to metaphysics, the latter understood as a de-temporalizing “science of

grounds.” For Arendt, the Western tradition of political philosophy is characterized by the interpretation of action as making, an interpretation undertaken in order to escape uncertainty of outcome and the conditioning finitude introduced by the dimension of human plurality. Both responses—philosophy as metaphysics and political philosophy as the theoretical specification of the practical—are “inauthentic” reactions to the groundlessness of human being (Heidegger) and the groundlessness and uncertainty of political action and freedom (Arendt).

I conclude with a consideration of Heidegger’s own entrapment in the metaphors of fabrication, namely, his pursuit of an authentic or “radical” form of *poiesis*.