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Toward an Affect-Theory of Political Action:
Arendt, Butler, and the Apparitions of Emotion

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Philosophy
2019

Abstract

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By Katherine B. Howard

Even among nonspecialized audiences, the idea that emotion plays an important role in politics is widely assumed, but not well understood. This project explores the relationship in philosophy between emotion and politics, focusing on the question of action. How and why does action happen? Bringing together a set of resources at the intersections of politics, philosophy, and feminism, the dissertation uses affect theory to explore how feeling with others motivates collective forms of action (e.g., protest) when issues of common concern are at stake.

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt's action-theory of politics serves as the anchor for the project's theoretical orientation, while the feminist inheritance of that theory, especially in the work of Judith Butler, raises the ethical questions that propel it. Of primary concern is Butler's ethical theory of agency and the difficulty that it poses for traditional accounts of free will and action. While Butler focuses on the ethical import of action as a responsibility to respond to the demands of others, I am particularly concerned with how that moral responsibility is felt and embodied. The dissertation argues that shame is the emotion that corresponds with feelings of moral responsibility and that therefore, shame plays an important mediating role between subjective ethical agency and performative political action. Changing attitudes toward shame in psychological and philosophical literature indicate that shame is not a wholly negative emotion. While shame often stalls and debilitates action, it can also spur it, motivating personal and political transformation. The ambivalence of shame experiences demonstrates how emotion and action are co-implicated. The resulting account of political action contributes to pressing questions about the capacity for contemporary political subjects to act together in ethically and politically meaningful ways, as well as the affective conditions for encouraging or diminishing that capacity.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am so very grateful to my advisor, Cindy Willett, who gave me the space and encouragement to write this dissertation—without her steady presence, it is very possible I would have quit philosophy three years ago. I also want to thank the other members of my committee, who have been so generous and in many different ways. Thank you to Noëlle McAfee for the many opportunities you have helped me pursue over the years and for being one of the first to take a genuine interest in my work. Thank you to Marta Jimenez for always keeping it 100% real—you help me to be a better philosopher and a better human. Thank you to Libby Anker, who responded to a random email with interest and excitement—a small gesture that meant a lot to this young scholar. And to Dilek Huseyinzadegan, who hopped onto the project late in the game and with no hesitation—thank you for always being willing to lend a hand. And thank you to all my many teachers at Emory and beyond who have shaped how I think.

Thank you to my parents, without whom there would be nothing good in my world. A special warm thanks to my mom who grew me inside of her body for like a year and just keeps helping me grow.

I am also the product of three older siblings, who taught me a bunch of things that are way more important than philosophy: thank you to Claire-y, who taught me how to read; thank you to Jeff-y, who taught me how to drive; and thank you to Mr. Boo, who taught me how to laugh.

Thank you to my late grandparents, Claire and Leo Rhein, and all "The Rhein Girls" – extra special love and gratitude to Jonna Rhein, the "unmarried aunt" that every young girl deserves.

I'm lucky to have great friends and colleagues who inspire me and keep me moving. Thank you first and foremost to Omar Quiñonez and Taina Figueroa. To Jordan Daniels and Lily Levy. Thank you to Sam Timme – I will never find a better writing buddy! To Roshni Patel, Dwight Lewis, Lilly Richard, Gus Meuschke, Christina Neshewat, Whitney Ronshagen, Sara Saba, Mike Chiddo, Tiara Jackson, Andrea Warmack, Tamsin Kimoto, Shouta Brown, Taryn Jordan, Andrew Culbreth, Ben Davis, Jason Walsh, and Mukasa Mubirumusoke.

Toward an Affect-Theory of Political Action:
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Katie B. Howard

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Introduction

Is politics today too "touchy-feely"? Although political judgments are not necessarily reducible to "feelings," as some philosophers might claim, neither are they fully rational, as others might hope. In the history of philosophy, much has been lost arguing for and against these two extremes, even as other fields—notably (moral) psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and others—increasingly take for granted that reason and emotion have never been separable. Politics in the United States was overtly emotional when I began this project in November 2016. A casual observer of US politics at that time would agree that all kinds of people are capable of having strong emotional reactions to things like electoral outcomes, and moreover, that those electoral outcomes emerged in and from a highly charged emotional atmosphere. The focus of this dissertation however is not electoral politics, and for the most part, not formal politics of any kind. Instead, I analyze aspects of largescale popular mobilizations that I find salient for exploring the role of emotion in political action.

In the first lines of the introduction to her 2015 book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Judith Butler reminds us that mass assemblies "can be a source of hope as well as fear," since the unpredictable nature of these gatherings suggests both the terror of mob action and the democratic promise of action in concert. "In a way," she writes, "democratic theories have always feared 'the mob' even as they affirm the importance of expressions of the popular will, even in their unruly form."[1] Butler's reference in these first pages to the spontaneous, contingent, and sometimes "unruly" nature of contemporary mass assemblies clearly calls to mind Hannah Arendt's theory of action. So too does

[1] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1. This tension within democratic theory can be easily identified in Arendt's political thought, for instance in the distinction she draws between the French and American revolutionary traditions in *On Revolution* – that is, between action that becomes terror and action that becomes freedom.

the suggestion of a certain political anxiety about emotionality, which arguably characterizes Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism and mass behavior.

Although emotion has probably always been an important factor in "expressions of the popular will," it is noteworthy that at least some of the conflict currently animating public political debate in the United States has to do with whether or not emotion should be considered a valid form of public political debate. We witness this in conflicts that arise between competing claims about the harms of hate speech and protections for freedom of speech, and college campuses are arguably their primary battleground.[2] The idea that freedom of speech trumps all other considerations, including the harms of hate speech, can be seen in the rise of what is known as "Free speech fundamentalism," and in the debates around "safe spaces," "trigger warnings," and "political correctness." With Butler, I argue that part of what is at issue in these debates are disagreements about "what constitutes expressive activity and its limits,"[3] or more precisely: What constitutes genuine political action and its limits?

Although the central aim of this dissertation is to explore "what emotions do"—specifically the role of emotion in political action—it is not possible to engage with that question without first dealing with the status of emotion in the history political philosophy, an issue that is usually tied to outmoded assumptions about "what emotions are." Indeed, whether emotions are deemed apolitical, unpolitical, or antipolitical points to political factors and political implications. As I make clear throughout this dissertation, when it comes to political philosophical accounts of what "counts" as political or

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[2] In an article on *The Feminist Wire,* Joy James relates how institutional statements in support of freedom of expression—such as the 2015 "Chicago Statement," a report on freedom of expression released by the University of Chicago—are used to legitimize hate speech. Against those who want to collapse hate speech into free speech and legitimize its protection, James writes: "There is a distinct difference between abolitionist speech that supports justice and predatory speech that legitimizes repression." (Joy James, "The (Un)Fair Fight for a Just Democracy," *The Feminist Wire,* November 23, 2018. < https://thefeministwire.com/2018/11/the-unfair-fight-for-a-just-democracy/ >)

[3] See Judith Butler, 'Limits on Free Speech?', Academe Blog, December 7, 2017 (https://academeblog.org/2017/12/07/free-expression-or-harassment/) and Conor Friedersdorf's response: Friedersdorf, 'Judith Butler Overestimates the Power of Hateful Speech,' *The Atlantic,* December 12, 2017 (https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/12/judith-butler-on-the-power-of-hateful-speech/548138/).

philosophical, there is a world of difference between the view that emotions are irrational, uncontrollable urges, and the view that emotions involve essential epistemic, evaluative, and moral components that make human social and political life possible.

Sara Ahmed, whose accounts of emotion and space I return to in later chapters, contributes to a long feminist tradition in philosophy that traces how emotion has been treated as opposed to and inferior to reason. Using a phenomenology-inspired affect theory, Ahmed convincingly shows how emotion "sticks" to particular bodies—for her, feminine and dark bodies—that are thereby "represented as 'closer' to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment."[4] "It is not difficult to see," she writes, "how emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is 'lower' or 'higher' into bodily traits. So emotionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow 'others' with meaning and value[...]"[5] This value-laden attribution of emotionality has important social consequences that scholars in affect studies often refer to as a "politics of affect." Moreover, as Ahmed notes, the traditional hierarchy between emotion and thought/reason "gets displaced...into a hierarchy between emotions," so that the evolution of cultural attitudes about emotionality becomes a story not only about "the triumph of reason, but of the ability to control emotions, and to experience the 'appropriate' emotions at different times and places."[6] Contemporary discourses around "respectability politics,"[7] "white fragility"[8] or "fragile masculinity," vulnerability, and framing,[9] arise partly in relation to the way that coercive social norms congeal in response to this history. One of my primary interests involves how "emotionality as a claim about a

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[4] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.
[5] *Ibid.,* 4.
[6] *Ibid.,* 3.
[7] See for instance Brittney Cooper's discussion in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017.
[8] See Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon, 2018).
[9] See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2010).

subject or a collective" works to limit the very scope of what counts as politics and who counts as political, and thus to devalue or delegitimize the modes of political action that marginalized subjects might engage in. Considering one group in particular, "feminists,"' Ahmed writes:

> Feminists who speak out against established "truths" are often constructed as emotional, as failing the very standards of reason and impartiality that are assumed to form the basis of "good judgment." Such a designation of feminism as "hostile" and emotional, whereby feminism becomes an extension of the already pathological "emotionality" of femininity, exercises the hierarchy between thought/emotion...This hierarchy clearly translates into a hierarchy between subjects: whilst thought and reason are identified with the masculine and Western subject, emotions and bodies are associated with femininity and racial others. This projection of emotion onto the bodies of others not only works to exclude others from the realms of thought and rationality, but also works to conceal the emotional and embodied aspects of thought and reason.[10]

According to Ahmed, maintaining the hierarchy between reason and emotion is crucial for subordinating women and racial others, as well as delegitimizing the validity of feminist and anti-racist politics, whether individual or collective. Consider how a demonstration in the United States protesting the killing of an unarmed Black man is seen as "uncivil noise"[11]—i.e. without meaningful political content, aims, or demands—and violently dispersed by police on the basis of that judgment. Or consider Hillary Clinton's response to Black Lives Matter activists during her 2016 U.S. presidential campaign that politics is about changing policies, not hearts.[12] The explosion of literature in popular media[13] and in the humanities and social sciences[14] within the past year alone testifies to the increasing awareness about how emotions like rage, fear, and shame permeate the public realm. These books,

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[10] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 170.

[11] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (2015): 20.

[12] Dan Merica, 'Black Lives Matter videos, Clinton campaign reveal details of meeting,' CNN.com, August 18, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/18/politics/hillary-clinton-black-lives-matter-meeting/index.html>

[13] On women and rage alone: Leslie Jamison's article "I Used to Insist I Didn't Get Angry. Not Anymore" (*New York Times*) "The Enduring, Messy Power of Rage-filled Women" by Emma Gray (*HuffPost*), "Fury is a Political Weapon. And Women Need to Wield It" by Rebecca Traister (*New York Times*), "Black Women Have Never Had the Privilege of Rage" by Kimberly Seals Allers (*HuffPost*).

[14] See for instance: Martha Nussbaum's recent books *Monarchy of Fear* (2018), Soraya Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (2018), Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018), Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (2018), and Carol Anderson's *White Rage* (2017). Other major works in recent years include: Nussbaum's *Political Emotions* (2015), Melissa Harris-Perry's *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2013), and Chris Lebron's *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time* (2013).

largely the work of women and people of color, explicitly respond to the current political climate and should be considered part of the activism surrounding the Movement for Black Lives, the election in the U.S. of Donald Trump, and the #MeToo movement, including the recent appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court despite the multiple accusations of sexual assault leveled against him by different women. Mainstream political philosophy is still very much shaped by the contributions of two dominant/dominating 20th century figures: John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. The overtly rationalist and speech-centered theories of political action that these discourses produce has often meant that political philosophy as a whole is slow to join conversations in other disciplines (and in multi- and inter-disciplinary contexts) about the role of emotion and political action. Implicitly, then, an important aim of this project is to argue that affect and emotion matter when it comes to political action, and consequently, that theories of political action in political philosophy that do not seriously consider how affect functions fail to address a significant and unavoidable dimension of political life.

Affect and emotion

Like Sara Ahmed, I am more concerned with exploring what emotions *do* than I am with determining what emotions *are.*[15] I will however offer a brief sketch that describes my general approach, for instance, how I will be using the terms "affect" and "emotion" throughout the dissertation. Although I believe that the greater part of my project does not require sharp distinctions between these concepts (as well as related terms like "passion," "feeling," etc.), I do find it helpful to specify a few basic points at the outset.

[15] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 4.

For the most part, I use "affect" and "emotion" interchangeably. However, there are few places in my argument where making distinctions using the points below will be helpful. First, "affects" reflect a broad interested attunement to the world that is often independent of specific objects; for example, referring to the general mood or "vibe" of a room is a way of naming its affective atmosphere. Moreover, having some degree of affect—i.e., interest in the world, vitality with respect to the world—is necessary for maintaining social relations and pursuing action. According to Sylvan Tomkins, whose work looms large in the feminist affect theories that I study, the affect system is our primary, biological, motivation system—in other words, affects are what constitute our basic capacity to feel strongly or weakly about anything at all.[16] Next, "emotions" are usually intensifications or concentrations of affect around particular objects, they often involve a combination of more than one affect, and sometimes include a cognitive assessment of some object or situation. This is why it makes sense to me to use "affect" as the more general concept and "emotion" as the more specific one; i.e., while all emotions involve affect, not all affects are emotions. In cases where an emotional response clearly demonstrates a cognitive assessment (for instance, a moral assessment about some event or object), I sometimes use "affect" to refer to the "felt aspect" of that emotion. Unlike some "cognitivists," however, who view emotion as having a dual structure—the affective ("felt") component and the cognitive ("evaluative") component—I do not think this ought to be a sharp duality or that one component is more necessary than the other. Third, following the recent work of Shannon Sullivan (*The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression,* 2015), I view affects and emotions as unavoidably social *and* physiological phenomena, even if they are/are not consciously felt or are/are not reflective. Finally, as Sara Ahmed describes, affects/emotions shape various dimensions of social space, marking out the shifting boundaries of social, political, and physical bodies.

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[16] Sylvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader.* eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 45-46.

I go into all of these preliminary points in more detail in chapter two and show how I arrived at them. Since shame is the affect/emotion that I examine most deeply throughout the dissertation, I will turn briefly to the example of shame now in order to clarify the above points a bit more.

Shame might be described as both an affect and an emotion. Whether the shame response is ultimately characterized as an affect or as an emotion, we can identify shame *as* shame a few different ways; for instance, the shame response is usually activated by the experience of some failure, transgression, or "strangeness"[17] in my relations with others (or relations with others via social norms, regulations, expectations, etc.); shame usually shows up in specific ways, so that a phenomenological account will pick out specific facial transformations, including an averted gaze and possibly blushing; someone who is ashamed typically turns in and away, increasing distance from others and thereby transforming the layout of social space; etc. All of these aspects and more seem to be true of shame whether we characterize it as an affect or as a full-fledged emotion. What changes is the level of specificity/generality, whether shame is attached to an identifiable object/event or is instead a more diffuse "mood" or "sense," whether it is activated by a conscious reflection and self-evaluation or an unconscious, nondescript, experience of the self, etc. In chapter three and four, for instance, I distinguish "shame about being" from "shame about conduct." In the latter case, shame arises as a response to how something that I have done reveals me to myself, i.e., as somehow worse than I had previously hoped. It's probably more accurate to call this an emotion, since it refers to how a specific deed reflects on some specific version of who I take myself to be and how I am engaged in more or less conscious, intentional reflection on that resulting tension. In the former case, however, shame might be experienced as a "pervasive affective attunement"[18] to the world and my social positioning in it without necessarily indexing specific incidents or a clear sense of causality. This might simply be

[17] Sylvan Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters,* 136-138.
[18] Sandra Bartky, "Shame and Gender," *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 85.

the result of one's positioning and conditioning within some repressive social order—e.g., within a patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist society—so that the "flaw" that elicits shame is not about anything I do, but about who I am. It is more accurate to call this an affect rather than an emotion: this shame, because it is pervasive and prior to me, is necessarily more diffuse, nonspecific, and inchoate, although it can be brought to a level of conscious reflection and analysis (and then perhaps resisted and rejected). It might color how I experience the world in every situation and not only those situations where I reveal myself as flawed or failed via some action.

Outline of chapters

Action and Affect Theory. In order to better understand what happens when bodies assemble in the street, I bring together two strains of thought: the political philosopher Hannah Arendt's radical democratic theory of political action and a theory of emotion found in Affect Theory. Affect Theory represents a multidisciplinary set of resources (from psychology, sociology, neuroscience, as well as philosophy) that tries to answer questions about how different actors experience, embody, share, and understand their emotional being. When applied to political questions, affect theories help to understand how emotion affects the world that we share with others, shapes our political practices, and encourages or impedes political action. In philosophy, the role of emotion is often denigrated or dismissed in discussions about political action, and consequently the questions that I raise here are often designated as pre-political, contrary to reason, merely private, and "womanly" – it is not uncommon to hear contemporary political movements that express emotions, for instance rage, referred to in this same way, i.e., as non-political, "touchy-feely," irrational, and even violent. And yet, I argue that these concerns about emotion have a way of obscuring the crucial function it nonetheless plays at the root of political action.

By bringing an affect theory to bear on political theoretical accounts of action, a tradition that privileges reason to the exclusion of emotion, I develop an account of political action that takes into consideration the embodied and affective *experience* of being with others in the midst of the elevated passions that characterize many political assemblies. I have found the most consistent and important interlocutors for this project in feminist political theory, a field more likely to explore the relations between emotion and action in generative ways. Together, feminist political theorists and affect theorists paint a very different picture of what political actors are, not as autonomous individuals, but as embodied, relational, affect-laden subjects deeply related to and dependent on each other in order to act.

While part of my aim is to make a case for taking contributions from affect theory seriously, I am more concerned with showing how affect theories give us tools to understand how emotion plays a role in convening the kinds of political assemblies that are important for robustly democratic communities. To this end, I engage the *performative* action-theory of politics rooted in the work of 20th century political philosopher Hannah Arendt. However, Arendt's theory of action, easily the most important and influential concept in her corpus, remains elusive for Arendt scholars. While Arendt presents a highly developed description of the human capacity for political action across her many texts, she is not really interested in how that capacity is enacted. For instance, in *The Human Condition,* the work that forms her philosophical treatment of what she calls the *vita activa,* or "active life," Arendt famously states that her aim in the book is solely to "think what we are doing." Her preoccupation with the "what" of action comes at the expense of ignoring the "how" of action, a question that she often explains away by referring to it as a "miracle." What explains the *enactment* of action in a given case? What moves us to act in one situation and not another? I argue that gaining more clarity about the problem of the impetus to act within the tradition of radical democratic theory will not only

contribute to a gap in scholarship on this aspect of Arendt's work, but will provide a way for thinking about how to encourage the proliferation of meaningful democratic action.

How does action happen? In the first chapter of the dissertation I work closely with the action-theory of politics that Arendt develops in *The Human Condition.* I argue that Arendt's theory of action remains the most promising way of orienting a radical democratic politics because of its inherent commitment to human freedom and equality, but I suggest that she does not sufficiently explain how action happens. While Arendt seems to locate the impetus for action in "free will," a metaphysical concept, her treatment of the Will in *The Life of the Mind* raises more questions than it answers. Specifically, I argue that free will is not an adequate explanation for how action happens, given the highly unusual concept of action that Arendt deploys. Arendt famously writes that all action is "action in concert" – that is, I only act at all if I act *with others.* It is this relational and associational aspect of Arendt's theory that "free will" cannot sufficiently account for and at the same time, the aspect that so accurately explains the kind of action that is on display in political assemblies. Arendt's agentic subject is not sovereign and autonomous, but relational, and therefore requires a theory that explains how a relational agent is moved to act which does not rely on the spontaneity of "free will."

In part then, the dissertation engages in a highly technical discussion of Hannah Arendt's most complex concept: action. In this, I join other Arendt scholars who come before me. And yet, I argue that there is a mystery at the core of this much cited theory that still needs to be worked out. And further, I propose a theory of emotion that relies on the everyday realities of embodiment to do it, especially how embodiment is experienced as feminine and racialized. While some have explored the embodied dimensions of political agency (in Arendt and in general), there is surprisingly little on how emotion functions as one of those embodied dimensions. In my reading of Arendt, this allows me to downplay the importance of speech – a move that goes against the grain in Arendt studies and stakes

a position in the long, ongoing debate between two camps that have largely shaped Arendt's legacy: the deliberative democrats (e.g., Jürgen Habermas) and the agonists (e.g., Chantal Mouffe). I try to posit a new location, or at least a different tradition from which to take inspiration in reading Arendt's action theory of politics that exists at the intersection of affect theory and feminist philosophy.

Throughout, I engage a predominantly woman-authored and oriented set of resources – almost exclusively woman philosophers and scholars, as well as woman-centered examples of political phenomena. Some of these women are feminist thinkers, some, including Arendt, aren't. This was not just a personal choice, but a methodological one. It is still common for political philosophers to presume an exclusively rational and autonomous agentic subject, and moreover to associate these qualities with masculinity. Without disqualifying the merits of such work, I choose to explore other resources for understanding action in a "womanly" discussion of emotion, and thus to begin to think political action differently.

Thus, my aim in the remainder of the dissertation is to add a set of conceptual tools for understanding the root of action that Arendt does not consider because she shares many of the history of philosophy's traditional biases. Arendt's failure to take seriously the role of emotion in political action is related to her well-documented disdain for the whole realm of bodily materiality and biological necessity, a position with strong sexist and racist implications that feminist theorists have convincingly critiqued since the 1970s. Working with these critiques, I show that Arendt's failure to theorize political action (and political actors) as *embodied* is central to her inability to show how action happens, and even her disinterest in the question. Further, I argue that philosophers who take up Arendt's account cannot deal with an important range of issues in political life without a rejoinder, one that must be found outside her work.

"Being moved" to act. Partly to help in this task, I turn to the work of Judith Butler in chapter three. Although Butler is perhaps best known for her pioneering work in gender theory, her recent political writings draw extensively and deeply from Arendt. As Butler herself states,

> What I take from Arendt is the notion that there might be forms of political agency, what she would call "action," that require a self conceived as plurality. This is not a self divided up internally into separate parts, but one that comes into being, on the occasion of relations with others and so is "located" precisely in and as the relation itself. At least this seems to be one version of Arendt's view, and it follows from her efforts to criticize political sovereignty and to offer a plural and "federated" version of politics. I want to suggest that there is a "federating" of the self as well, and that this constitutes a specific way of thinking about the relational subject. But more than that, I am interested in how she delineates the domain of what is "unchosen" in life and in sociality, since whatever "agency" is possible and valuable is conditioned by an unchosen realm...[19]

The areas of convergence that Butler identifies between her own thinking and Arendt's—agency, plurality, relationality, unchosenness—are themes that I return to again and again throughout this dissertation. Butler's recent work on public assemblies shows how bodies come together to make demands, and how assembling constitutes political action in the Arendtian sense, but with more sustained attention to issues of materiality and embodiment. The theory of "performativity" that results has been both invaluable and challenging for my project. As I show, Butler's concerns usefully extend the reach of Arendt's theory into the corporeal domain, introducing themes like sensation, vulnerability, and precarity that were previously closed to Arendt studies. However, her work also complicates the central question about how action happens by further deconstructing the agentic subject. By diverging from Arendt in this manner, Butler leads the discussion of action into increasingly collective, corporeal, and finally, *affective,* domains. Like Butler, I turn to the phenomenon of public assembly, but unlike Butler, I am specifically interested again in the intersection of emotion

[19] Athanasiou and Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political,* 122.

and action. This turn is a re-turn to thinking about how action happens, but with the resources of a corporeal theory of relationality.

Affect and Embodied Action. While I view Butler's action-theory as an improvement on Arendt's, there is an important dimension of contemporary politics that does not come into focus within a Butlerian frame: Given that we are constituted in and through the material dimensions of our relations with others in order to act, what is it about these enabling relations that *moves* us to act? I argue that accounts of the embodied experience of political action (in feminist theory, phenomenology, and psychology) point to the crucial role of affect and emotion for motivating, animating, and sustaining that action. Reading Butler's account of ethical responsibility, I will emphasize how "feeling responsible" is indeed a *feeling-full* relation that compels action. And in her later work: Just as "precarity" is an embodied, material concept on Butler's account, so too is "acting from precarity." Action, I argue, involves an affective engagement with the world that should be understood as an essential aspect of that material embodiment.

While Butler gives us more language to talk about what happens when bodies get together in the street, she has not fully developed the affect theoretical resources necessary to explain what *moves* people to assemble in the first place. In other words, Butler's phenomenologically-oriented approach to political action sets up, but doesn't execute, a turn to the philosophy of emotion. This is the work of chapter four. Earlier, in chapter two, I provide a survey of relevant work in the philosophy of emotion in order to imagine what this "affective turn" would look like for a radical democratic theory of politics. Specifically, I provide a brief history of western philosophy's typically dismissive attitude toward the role of emotion in political life, exploring how Arendt and Butler fail to challenge this attitude. I argue that Arendt in particular is deeply mistaken about what emotions are and what they do, and further that these mistakes are representative of a larger and largely unfounded bias against

the biological, against women, and against racialized others. This bias prevents her from seeing the important role that emotion in fact plays in performative action. The account of emotion that I propose instead, emphasizes the creative, revelatory, collaborative, and empowering dimensions of emotional experience, explaining how these experiences are thoroughly physiological even as they are psychological. Political emotions, I argue, are thus habitual and habituated, as well as sites of resistance. In the course of making this argument, I examine recent works in political theory (normative and non-normative) that try to account for what emotions do, especially Martha Nussbaum,[20] Sharon Krause,[21] Iris Marion Young,[22] Cheryl Hall,[23] Elisabeth Anker,[24] and Sara Ahmed.[25]

Chapter four further develops a theory of performative action to argue that emotion is itself a mode and a capacity for action, not merely a(n unfortunate) property or secondary quality of action. In other words, those who would dismiss the actions of individuals or assemblies for not adequately adhering to particular standards of rational discourse do an injustice because they denigrate what are frequently substantial, subversive, and thoroughly political-critical modes of resistance. Accounts of anger in feminist philosophy and critical philosophy of race (for instance in the work of Elizabeth Spelman, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks) have consistently shown how emotions like anger are essential sites for the epistemologies and ethics of oppressed peoples and that these become especially relevant for thinking about political principles like justice and equality. Building on these arguments, I argue that emotions also play a necessary role in action, specifically they constitute the relational capacities essential for plural performative action in concert, i.e. collective political action. Rather than anger,

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[20] Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013).
[21] Sharon Krause *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[22] Iris Marion Young, "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Theory* 29, no. 5 (2001): 670-690 and *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).
[23] Cheryl Hall, "'Passions and Constraint': The marginalization of passions in liberal political theory," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28, no. 6 (2002): 727-748 and "Recognizing the Passion in Deliberation: Toward a More Democratic Theory of Deliberative Democracy," *Hypatia* 22, no. 4 (2007): 81-95.
[24] Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
[25] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

however, I closely examine the movement of a different emotion: shame. In conversation with feminists, psychologists, and phenomenologists, I emphasize how shame has a unique, and possibly privileged, relation to action and also to other emotions. While it has the potential to spur us to action, shame can also be isolating and ultimately immobilizing. And meanwhile, shame about *emotionality* is an increasingly common mode of shame that has the power to utterly diminish emotional experience as such. Having introduced shame in chapter three as an underdeveloped but important theme in Butler's work, chapter four demonstrates that emotion—in this case, shame—provides a way for the gendered, classed, and racialized complexity of action in concert to appear in ways that expose its roots. The promise and the danger of shame is its potential for either forging or destroying our relations – precisely those relations that, for both Arendt and Butler, ground the condition for the possibility of any action whatsoever.

Chapter One: The "Miracle" of Action

> "The crucial difference between the infinite improbabilities on which earthly human life is based and miraculous events in the arena of human affairs lies, of course, in the fact that in the latter case there is a miracle worker—that is, that man himself evidently has a most amazing and mysterious talent for working miracles. The normal, hackneyed word our language provides for this talent is "action." Action is unique in that it sets in motion processes that in their automatism look very much like natural processes, and action also marks the start of something, begins something new, seizes the initiative, or, in Kantian terms, forges its own chain. The miracle of freedom is inherent in this ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning.
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>
> "The question of whether politics still has any meaning inevitably sends us, at that very point where it ends in a belief in miracles—and where else could it possibly end?—right back to the question of the meaning of politics."
>
> Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics"[26]

Introduction

Hannah Arendt's account of political action makes for frustrating and difficult reading. One is struck by the exciting spectacle of action's "boundless" potentialities, the suggestion that "one deed, and sometimes a single word, suffices to change every constellation,"[27] and at the same time its utter uncertainties, that we can set in motion, but cannot control how action will unfold. This ambivalence characteristic of Arendt's account of action—the risk and the promise, especially for theories of radical democracy—is why it remains relevant today. As the "dark times" of the 20th century unfold into the, perhaps, "darker" times of the 21st century, the redemptive quality of Arendt's account of action retains all of its messianism. Understanding the promise of action is essential if we are to retain its optimism, which is indeed so sorely needed today.

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[26] Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 113-114.
[27] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 190.

Arendt's theory of political action is novel, responding to novel political threats and possibilities, and it has sustained deep unknowns despite the fact that *The Human Condition* was written over a half-century ago, spawning a large body of secondary literature. For Arendt, the idea that action is spontaneous grounds her broader theory that action is an experience of freedom, and her hope to in turn claim some freedom for the sphere of politics. As she explains in the quotation that begins this chapter, action "marks the start of something, begins something new, seizes the initiative, or... forges its own chain. The miracle of freedom is inherent in this ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning." Here, Arendt collapses freedom and action into the singular "miracle" of birth that marks the beginning of something new. Importantly however, she does not claim that we passively endure miracles, but instead, that "there is a miracle worker—that is, that man himself evidently has a most amazing and mysterious talent for working miracles." In other words, the "mysterious talent for *working miracles,"* or action, describes a general capacity for spontaneously beginning something new. This capacity, and the activity it inaugurates, are characteristically free.

My aim in this chapter is to provide a foundation for explaining something about action's characteristic spontaneity that Arendt is content to leave basically mysterious – indeed, I would say that her use of the term "miracle" is not accidental since "miraculous" also means inexplicable. What moves us to act? What gets action going? While my own struggle to understand what Arendt is up to is perhaps not noteworthy—after all, her thinking is complex and often contradictory—it should be considerably more interesting that Arendt herself marks similar frustrations, even resignation, as she attempts to understand the nature of action. As I note in the Introduction, Arendt's task in *The Human Condition* is to "think what we are doing." She was not interested in exploring *how* action happens or what it feels like. This is probably, as Jennifer Ring suggests, a symptom of her broader preoccupation

with "excluding self-consciousness from politics": "[Arendt] claims to be concerned primarily with the *effects* of action; she claims that motives are hidden, untrustworthy, and inaccessible."[28]

For Arendt, the question about whether understanding has *access* to experience is crucial. As we will see in more detail in the section on "Willing," Arendt upholds traditional philosophical (and antiquated) distinctions between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa,* i.e., between the mental faculties (thinking, willing, judging) and those associated with activity (labor, work, action). As a result of this separation, action becomes a concept that necessarily resists its own theorization. By the end of her career, in the late and unfinished philosophical work *The Life of the Mind,* Arendt seems committed to the belief that there is something untranslatable or untransferable between the experience of acting and reflecting on acting. Indeed, she preserves a structural gap – not only between the *vita activa* (active life) and *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life), but between the three "autonomous" faculties of the mind (thinking, willing, judging). The strict autonomy of these faculties means that Arendt seems forced to acknowledge that "thinking" is structurally incapable of accurately accounting for the *experience* of acting. According to Arendt, the mental faculties "de-sense" our worldly experiences – this is what allows thinking to take the form of memory, for instance. When we think, or muse, or recall, we are, for Arendt, de-sensing our real experiences, removing ourselves from other activities, and we become temporarily "worldless." Again, as we'll see in the section on "Willing," the idea that thinking cannot "touch" experience is very important.

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[28] "There is a temptation to wonder whether Arendt's rules about the appropriate consciousness of the political actor are not utterly impossible and truly manipulative. She claims to be concerned primarily with the *effects* of action; she claims that motives are untrustworthy, hidden, and inaccessible. Yet she may be so preoccupied with the excluding self-consciousness from politics that she runs the risk of dwelling on just what she wants to forget. Even if we allow that she is making an important point (and I believe that she is) in trying to exclude the possibility of self-indulgence and altruism, in order to focus attention not on the inner self but on the world, people must have *something* on their minds when they act. She does not advocate mindlessness, and indeed, in her writings on totalitarianism and Eichmann, she believes that real crime of the war criminals as well as the bourgeoisie was a refusal to think. Yet she draws rigid guidelines about the state of mind qualified to accompany action." Jennifer Ring, "The Pariah as Hero: Hannah Arendt's Political Actor," *Political Theory* 19, no. 3 (1991): 436.

When it comes to action then, recalling Ring's point above, Arendt is deeply suspicious, if not dismissive, of self-consciousness. Indeed, as George Kateb tells us, Arendt frequently deploys the term "subjective" pejoratively. For Arendt, the "intangible" quality of action is both a claim about the nature of action (its contingency and uncertainty), and a characteristic of the actor – action must remain intangible (unintelligible) because our mental faculties can't reach it. While in other ways Arendt proves herself to be a keen phenomenologist, she is reluctant to accept that subjective, somatic experience could shed any light on the nature of action. As I will argue, the fact that action is "intangible" in various ways, does not mean that it is entirely opaque. (And indeed, we should not take Arendtian or other existing philosophical standards for granted when assessing the value of either clarity or opacity.)

If we think the Will is the mental faculty most closely connected with the experience of beginning something new—of acting—then it is significant that by the time Arendt wrote her last work, *The Life of the Mind,*[29] she wonders "whether men of action were not perhaps in a better position to come to terms with the problems of the Will than the men of thought dealt with [it…]" "What will be at stake here," she says, "is the Will as the spring of action, that is, as a 'power of *spontaneously* beginning a series of successive things or states'..."[30] She suggests that when it comes to the "miracle," or "spring," of action, "men of action" are in a "better position" to understand it than "men of thought," i.e., the philosophers. "I had been concerned with the problem of Action," she writes, "the oldest concern of political theory, and what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter, namely, *vita activa,* was coined by men who were devoted to

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[29] As Jerome Kohn writes, "The 'trouble' with *The Human Condition,* then, is not only that its portrait of man's active life is partial and incomplete—as if *The Life of the Mind,* with its accounts of mental activities, were written to fill it in—but that it was painted from the perspective of thinking, without consideration of what that meant, of the implications of the fact, that is, that thinking is the sheerest, least impeded activity of all. The reflexive act of turning to thinking is not, except terminologically, turning away from active life. […] Arendt's remarks here indicate the magnitude of the project of *The Life of the Mind,* which, if in some sense is a "return" to philosophy is decidedly *not* unrelated to her concerns with action, politics, and freedom." Kohn, "Thinking/Acting," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 110.

[30] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), 6-7.

the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective."[31] In a nod to what we might imagine is an embodied, phenomenological, and *action*-theory of knowledge, Arendt hesitantly grounds understanding in experience. And yet, the project of understanding action still remains uncertain since her work provides very little indication of what is significant for these experiences: *If* "men of action" have privileged access to the concept of action itself, then *how* is this the case? How might the *embodied* and *performative* dimensions of action contribute distinct forms of knowledge? And further, is it possible to render this knowledge intelligible?

In *The Human Condition,* "miracle" is the concept (or placeholder) Arendt uses to understand the problem of spontaneous action. This attempt to explain away a central aspect of action does so by attributing to it an essentially inexplicable quality, a miraculousness. I would argue that Arendt was never satisfied with this solution – the best evidence for this is the attention she continued to devote to the problem for the greater part of her career. There's something tragic about this. Imagine how Hannah Arendt, who, by her own estimation was not a "man of thought,"[32] nor a "man of action"—not a "man" at all—managed to nevertheless become one of the great political thinkers of the 20th century? She spent her career exploring "action" further and more consistently than any other single concept, and yet she arrives at the end of her life, having come to the conclusion that hers was an impossible project. She was not a political actor, and there are some things that, presumably, only those devoted to the vocation of politics could know. Whether this "humility" accurately portrays her own lack of political experience and is therefore appropriate, or whether she is instead using her own

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[31] *Ibid.,* 6.

[32] In a famous interview with Gunther Gaus, Arendt explains that she doesn't consider herself a philosopher: "The expression 'political philosophy,' which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things, academically or nonacademically, I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as thinking being and man as an acting being, there is a tension that does not exist in natural philosophy, for example. Like everyone else, the philosopher can be objective with regard to nature, and when he says what he things about it he speaks in the name of all mankind. But he cannot be objective or neutral with regard to politics. Not since Plato!...There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers, with very few exceptions…'I want no part in this enmity,' that's it exactly! I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy." Arendt, "Interview with Gunther Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 2.

limits to in turn operate a limiting function brought to bear on the contours of the concept itself will be important later. From my point of view, these comments could just as easily be read as reflections of a deeper and unremarked struggle about being a woman philosopher writing about politics and the implicit difficulties that held.[33]

As I explore in this chapter, what Arendt *is* able to tell us about action is illuminating and difficult. It's no secret that, in fact, she did have a wealth of political experience, even if she never considered herself a political actor. And meanwhile it is not such a matter of contention that she should be considered a political philosopher, when in fact she wrote several important political texts. Before going on to develop an embodied, intercorporeal, and affect-theoretical account of action in later chapters, I will begin by introducing Arendt's action-theory of politics. What is this account and why is it worth hanging onto? What does it have to offer contemporary politics? As I've hinted, even while the "miracle" of action is a point of difficulty and contention *within* Arendt's theory, it has become an important resource for radical theories of democracy amongst a diverse set of her many inheritors, and one that I want to hang onto. Therefore, clearly explicating Arendt's action-theory will be the primary aim of this chapter.

In my exegesis, I explore this theory's inability to account for a specific aspect of action—*viz.* how political action gets going—which I take to be politically significant, as well as philosophically interesting. I argue that Arendt does not adequately answer this question and contend in later chapters

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[33] Arendt's direct statements in response to some of these questions are contradictory. In the Gaus interview, Gaus asks, "Now let's turn to the question of woman's emancipation. Has this been a problem for you?" To which she responds: "Yes, of course; there is always the problem as such. I have actually been rather old-fashioned. I always that that there are certain occupations that are improper for women, that do not become them if I may put it that way. It just doesn't look good when a woman gives orders. She should try not to get into such a situation if she wants to remain feminine. Whether I am right about this or not I do not know. I myself have always lived in accordance with this more or less unconsciously—or let us rather say, more or less consciously. The problem itself played no role for me personally. To put it very simply, I have always done what I liked to do." Arendt, "Interview with Gunther Gaus," 2-3. Then again, during a meeting with a small group of women undergraduates at Vassar College in 1971, Michael Murray recalls, "One question asked was, Had she experienced difficulties or discrimination *as a woman* while she was studying in Germany among male faculty and students? No, she answered flatly, and left it that way, with a mild sense of shock among the students." Michael Murray, email to author, January 4, 2018.

that bringing emotion and the body more centrally into the focus of an Arendtian lens, following the lead of several feminist political theorists, will provide a way of understanding the "miracle" of action that does not abandon some important conditions for enacting action to beyond the purview of the "properly political." In other words, I mean to contest Arendt's implicit organizing belief that all things related to the so-called "realm of bodily materiality" are pre-political issues and therefore have no bearing on political action in its activity. Instead, by arguing for the inclusion of considerations about necessity, embodiment, and materiality into our understanding of what counts as constituting and constitutive of political action, I hope to shore up some of the explanatory impotence of Arendt's theory with regard to the so-called "freedom" and "spontaneity" of action. For me, this entails a re-thinking what "Arendtian" can mean – that it need not retain the old strains of elitism, misogyny, and Eurocentrism where we find Arendt getting in her own way.

It is not sufficient to say, for instance, that the defining popular political movements of the past ten years – from the Arab Spring, to Occupy, to the Movement for Black Lives, the BDS movement, and the Women's March – were "miracles," wholly spontaneous and intangible. The real work of organizing gets lost even as the magic (our sense of awe in the face of what people are capable of) should surely be emphasized.[34] Thus, a central problem I explore in this chapter involves a central ambiguity in Arendt's work between individual free will and collective agency, or "action in concert." How can the miracle of action, a function of the fact of natality, be thought from a collective and not an individual perspective?[35] Ultimately, "miracle" was only Arendt's first attempt to account for the spontaneity of action. In this chapter, I explore at least three other places where she tries to place action and that say something distinct about what gets action going: courage, suffering, and the Will.

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[34] Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 118-119.

[35] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 157. A collective, for which, as Judith Butler specifies, "to act in concert does not mean to act in conformity"; an individuality whose political meaning is plurality?

As I subsequently begin to gesture, my intuition regarding this problem is that an *affect theory* can provide a compelling account of how and when we are "roused to action." Once we pose the question of affect and emotion within an Arendtian politico-theoretical framework, I believe that many avenues open up, both in the increasingly conservative field of Arendt studies, and in political theory more broadly. While I will begin to approach the question of affect in this chapter, I will more fully develop its implications in chapters two and four.

I. The Sorcerer's Apprentice

> "This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human […] With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth […] This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin…to set something into motion."
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> - Arendt, *The Human Condition*[36]

Nearly every respected political theorist working on Arendt admits some confusion about her concept of political action – and if they don't, they certainly disagree enough amongst each other to give the rest of us pause. As George Kateb asks in his 1984 book *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil,* "What is the content of political action? This is a vexed question to which Arendt herself sometimes gives a perplexed answer…Undeniably, a certain vagueness marks Arendt's own thought on the question of the content of political action."[37] In answer to Kateb's question, scholars typically split into two camps. The first, the civic republicans (including the deliberative democrats), emphasize the work of "talking

[36] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 176.
[37] George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 16.

through" and tend to view political action as an almost communitarian democratic procedure between equal participants. The second camp, the agonists (including the performance theory of action), emphasize the individual's unending struggle to distinguish herself among peers, i.e., a democratic politics understood as permanent conflict, transformation, and (hopefully) improvement. For all the speech-centeredness of Arendt's theory, Hanna Pitkin wonders what Arendt's citizens are supposed to *talk about*, and more to the latter point, whether Arendt cares about ordinary citizens at all, or just "great or heroic action, which somehow embodies the essence of what action is all about."[38] While those aligned with the former perspective view democratic politics as a shared project of association, the latter view it as an ethos of struggle permeating a political community, drawing individuals together.

Along with this apparent tension between the collective and the individual subject of action, is another between the exclusivity and elitism of the public/private distinction and the boundlessness and inclusivity of action itself. In fact, this is a central point on which Arendt scholars diverge, some emphasizing the importance of the public square as a physical space where citizens gather, and others suggesting that this architecture of politics is not as important as its *power*. For the latter interpretation, action doesn't need a formal, already existing space in which to unfold—it may not even need publicity understood in a broader sense. Instead, what matters is the political power generated by those who come together, thereby creating their own space. With Cristina Beltrán, I will argue that this is how we should understand non-citizen mass protests and similar phenomena, which do something distinctly political despite the fact that they cannot depend on already existing institutions and spaces in which to stage their politics – indeed, they are frequently occasioned by the absence of those institutions.[39] Not only does dwelling on the architecture of politics demand certain material

[38] Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (Aug. 1981): 332.
[39] See Cristina Beltrán, "Going Public: Hannah Arendt, Immigrant Action, and the Space of Appearance," *Political Theory* 37, no. 5 (Oct. 2009): 595-622.

prerequisites that are by no means certain – I take Judith Butler's point seriously that sometimes we act politically in order to demand the very things that others (like Arendt) would deem pre-political[40] – but it also forces one to adopt a reading of Arendt's account of action that is generous to neither Arendt nor the political subjects that she theorizes.

The Human Condition is most influential as a philosophical treatment of political action, where "Action" is one of three essential faculties that make up the *vita activa,* or "active life," of human beings. In contrast to "Labor" and "Work," the originality of Arendt's account of "Action" makes it the most difficult of the three faculties—notoriously so—for scholars of Arendt's work to interpret. In order to provide a sketch of what Arendt means by "Action" separate from the commonplace usage of this word, I want to turn our attention to an image that appears toward the end of *The Human Condition.* Referencing Goethe's poem "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," she explains that, "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 would never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell."[41] English-speaking audiences are probably familiar with the Disney adaptation of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" in the film *Fantasia.* In *Fantasia*'s first vignette, a cartoon Mickey Mouse is the sorcerer's apprentice made to clean up the workshop of an elder sorcerer with a pail and broom. Mickey magics the broom and pail to do his work for him, but being untrained, everything soon descends into chaos, since he is unable to predict or control what he has put into motion – he is unable to summon "the magic formula to break the spell." In both the poem and the Disney film, this chaos

[40] See Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015.
[41] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 236.

is only cut short by the return of the "master" magician who is able to summon the power to stop this destructive process and put things right again.

Like magic, Arendt says that action is "like a miracle"[42] because it seems to arise out of nowhere. Against the natural, so-called "automatic," processes of biological life, the newness of action is both unaccountable and "infinitely improbable"; it refers to the miraculous interruption of a *new* process into the otherwise predictable, and therefore unremarkable, cycle of life and death:

> The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin. Yet just as, from the standpoint of nature, the rectilinear movement of man's life-span between birth and death looks like a peculiar deviation from the common natural rule of cyclical movement, thus action, seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle[…]Action is, in fact, the one miracle-working faculty of man[…]The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope…[43]

We get the gist of Arendt's meaning in a hackneyed phrase like "the miracle of birth" – indeed, for Arendt, action is grounded in the fact of birth understood as the appearance of the absolutely new within an already existing web of relationships. Without *natality,* this capacity for interrupting and beginning new processes, there would be no hope for avoiding natural decay and ruin. She writes, "It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their 'glad tidings': 'A child has been born unto us.'"[44]

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[42] *Ibid.,* 236.
[43] *Ibid.,* 246-247.
[44] *Ibid.,* 246-247.

From a feminist perspective, it is significant, and at the same time misleading, that the example Arendt provides for natality—"the birth of new men and new beginning"—is the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. True to Arendtian form, this "virgin" birth really does seem to come from nowhere, since it manages to avoid the "natural," biological processes that we typically require for reproduction. Further, the formulation of this event—"a child has been born unto us"—removes the maternal subject. Later, I discuss how his early separation between the miracle of action and biological necessity hints at Arendt's broader methodology: to protect the distinctiveness of action and politics, Arendt also draws sharp separations between, for instance, the public and private realms, men and women, the contemplative and the active life, mind and body, human and non-human animals, and speech and emotion.

This obsession with distinctions, what Seyla Benhabib more charitably terms "phenomenological existentialism,"[45] is one of many places where Aristotle's influence is felt in Arendt's action-theory. Her account of political action should be distinguished from his view in at least one important sense, however. Unlike Aristotle, she ultimately turns to *energeia* rather than *praxis* in order to establish the performative and not merely instrumental aspirations of her theory. She writes:

> It is this insistence on the living deed and the spoken word as the greatest achievements of which human beings are capable that was conceptualized in Aristotle's notion of *energeia* ("actuality"), with which he designated all activities that do not pursue an end (are *ateleis*) and leave no work behind (no *par' autas erga*), but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself…[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*…In other words, the means to achieve the end would already be the end; and this "end," conversely, cannot be considered a means in some other respect, because there is nothing higher to attain than this actuality itself.[46]

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[45] Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and Public Space," *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1993): 104.
[46] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 206-207.

This seemingly minor philosophical distinction tells us quite a lot about how Arendt thinks about action. First, it means that Arendt's is a strictly non-instrumental account of action. Second, that it is performative. And finally, that it is non-sovereign.

"The Sorcerer's Apprentice" helps illuminate some, but not all, of these aspects. While the freedom and spontaneity at the root of action certainly seems magical, Arendt will clarify that when it comes to action, there is nothing analogous to the master magician, i.e., a figure with the power to stop what we put into motion or reverse its consequences. Indeed, there is no "mastering" action. It is important to flag here a theme that will continue to emerge throughout my discussion of action: there is a strong tension in Arendt's action-theory between individual initiative (natality, courage, beginning) and common endeavors (plurality, interdependence, intimacy). This tension is what Arendt refers to as the "simultaneous presence of freedom and non-sovereignty," "of being able to begin something new and of not being able to control or foretell its consequences."[47] "If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same," she says, "then indeed, no man could be free, because sovereignty, the idea of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contrary to the very condition of plurality."[48] *Plurality,* or the fact that we exist with others, means that we can't predict how these others will take up, react to, or otherwise be affected by what we put into motion.

Consider Arendt's discussion of the revolutionary tradition, specifically the U.S. Declaration of Independence, an example I take up in greater detail in the next chapter. In Arendt's view, neither the Declaration, nor the spirit of the Revolution that it is said to embody, was either premeditated or predictable, and it was not employed instrumentally as a means to any specific end. Arendt frequently remarks that the revolutionaries didn't know what they were doing—an historical reading that resonates with the popular conception that the United States was a "great experiment."[49] According

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[47] *The Human Condition,* 235.
[48] *Ibid.,* 234.
[49] Hannah Arendt, "The Freedom to be Free," *New England Review* 38, no. 2 (2017): 60.

to Arendt, the power of the Declaration was derived from the People, all those contained in the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident…." This "performative" theory of power is essential for Arendt's broader account of action: it would evolve into the "communicative power" of Habermas, and the plural performativity of Butler. If all action is a "miracle," then speech acts of the Austinian variety, because they do something out of nothing are practically "magic." As Bonnie Honig writes, the Declaration of Independence is "a 'perfect' instance of political action because it consists 'not so much in its being "an argument in support of an action" as in its being an action that appears in words'…[There] is to be no 'being' behind this doing. The doing, the performance, is everything."[50]

The Declaration is "free" in a further sense: it is not the product of speech uttered by a single, autonomous actor; rather, it is only meaningful because it is the concerted activity of more than one. That is, the power of the speech act is non-sovereign even as it is free—a distinction that would initially seem contradictory because Arendt wants to affirm that we do depend on others in order to act at all. How does she reconcile freedom with this dependency, or nonsovereignty? The Declaration, because its constituting function shares the structure of the promise, must of necessity be the activity of plural individuals, the performance "in concert" of many. Without this aspect, "We hold" loses its significance and meaning because it does not in fact constitute a "We." According to Arendt, all words and deeds must be performed with and before others, otherwise, their very reality remains shadowy and uncertain. Revolution is emblematic of the freedom in nonsovereignty: it is only by acting "in concert," without knowing precisely what the outcome will be, that freedom is actualized in practice. In revolution, she says, "To be free and to start something new were felt to be the same."[51] For Arendt, this coincidence of freedom and action is the "miracle-working faculty of man," as well as the meaning of politics.

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[50] Bonnie Honig in Honig ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) 137-138.
[51] Arendt, "The Freedom to be Free," 67.

Arendt is concerned with strongly distinguishing these aspects of Action, which make it free and therefore political, from the other two activities that characterize the human condition, Labor and Work. Indeed, the clear distinction that A rendt draws between Work, the product of one's hands, and Action, suggests that this is the case.[52] After all, "The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action."[53] Freedom in politics is characterized by the right kind of action: plural, performative action in concert whose activity *and* outcome are free. "Whether it ends in success, with the constitution of a public space for freedom, or in disaster, for those who have risked it or participated in it against their inclination and expectation, the meaning of revolution is the actualization of one of the greatest and most elemental potentialities, the unequaled experience of *being* free to make a new beginning."[54] What this means is that the content of genuinely political action (i.e., freedom) cannot be either necessity (Labor) or utility (Work). Further, action is precisely not a "natural process," but an *enacted* one, and in this way, it is distinguished from any kind of human behavior that either serves or mimics the biological life process, including the entire realm of human need. Action is, for Arendt, a "faculty of interrupting" nature, not a means of continuing its cycles and processes. Indeed, primary to her critique of the modern age in *The Human Condition,* is the view that politics has been misappropriated as a tool for the fulfilment of needs (a vocation proper to Labor), and that Action has been devalued and deprived of its power in order to fit the mold of Work (and its distinctive means-ends reasoning). In no way, she thinks, should the laboring body, nor the crafty mind, contaminate the properly political activities of word and deed. Hanna Pitkin writes:

> To ward off the twin dangers of expediency and process, Arendt constantly emphasized the autonomy of action and sought to divorce it from all motives,

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[52] An important aspect of Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition* is her pseudo-historical account of the modern age as characterized by its inversion of the classical relationship between Work and Action, that Work was being passed off as Action, and that Action was apparently being accomplished in the mode of Work. Arendt calls this *homo faber's* "matter-of-course identification of fabrication with action." That is, we have ceded our grasp of the true meaning of Action because the modern age, the scientific worldview, etc. has refashioned Action as a means-ends process crafted by the certainty of what human hands make before our own eyes. (Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 305)

[53] Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 146.

[54] Arendt, "The Freedom to be Free," 68.

> purposes, antecedent conditions, and consequences. For if we think of action as undertaken for some specific, practical result, we might judge and regard it in utilitarian, expedient terms. And if we think of it as a product of any antecedent condition or intention, we might regard it as part of a causal chain and lose sight of its free nature. Arendt meant to call us from process and expedience to the possibility of glory, of greatness. And "greatness," which she equated with "the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor in its achievement."[55]

Action is thus groundless, on the one hand, and aimless on the other. Unlike both Labor and Work, Action is that activity that "leave[s] no work behind…but exhaust[s its] full meaning in the performance itself." The actor, in turn, reveals "himself as a distinctive *performer"*: "Action, like anything creative, is not an emanation or an unconditional unfolding, but an uncertain initiative in a preexistent and largely unpredictable world. The actor changes himself and the world as he acts. He shows himself and others that he is more than he knew."[56] Indeed, for Arendt, not only individual identity, but the fate of the world and the dignity of humanity, are bound up in action. This is one of the many reasons why she was so concerned with the infrequency and degradation of political action in the modern age.

But has Arendt's obsession with preserving a "purity of politics" uncontaminated by need or utility led her to purge the political of too much?[57] George Kateb asks the question that perhaps all who read Arendt eventually encounter: "What is political action?...What else but speech could political action essentially be, once violence is excluded as non-political, and such physical activities as labor and craft (and play, too) are conceptually opposed to political action?"[58] Kateb, like others, including Seyla Benhabib and Jürgen Habermas, conclude that despite the fact that Arendt explicitly distinguishes between action and speech—i.e. action in the mode of speech and action not in the mode of speech—she must *really* mean that all political action is speech, or speech-like. I heartily

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[55] Pitkin, "Justice," 341.
[56] Kateb, 10.
[57] Ring, 436.
[58] Kateb, 15.

disagree: not only because I believe that this is an incorrect interpretation of Arendt's own intentions, but because I am concerned about how this seemingly minor point of contention results in a tremendous deformation of our conception of the political. Indeed, although people like Benhabib and Kateb express the worry that Arendt purges politics of too much, they are only concerned with the kinds of acceptable *content* of political speech and not the context and acceptable modes of practicing politics itself. In other words, by restricting politics to speech, they enforce a curious limitation on the activities of politics even as they criticize other such limitations originating from Arendt herself.

Though I find it necessary to resist this privileging of speech popular in the deliberative tradition, it does avoid the trap of overemphasizing the natal aspect of Arendt's action-theory that tends to be overly individualistic. Arendt makes it clear, as I've said, that *plurality,* and *not* natality, is "*the* condition" of political life: "Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."[59] In other words, while action is characterized by both natality *and* plurality, it is plurality that deserves primacy. While I believe this point is clearly articulated in the text, it is easy to understand why many of Arendt's readers might want to emphasize natality instead; Recall the "faith in and hope for the world" that Arendt says is connected to natality, the birth of the radically new. What this means for her, as she later puts it, is that "the smallest act in the most limited circumstances, bears the seed of...boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation."[60] There's something incredibly hopeful and self-affirming in this idea. I argue however that this emphasis on natality has the unfortunate effect of

[59] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 7-8.
[60] *Ibid.,* 190.

individualizing action, when in fact, Arendt's focus on plurality should turn our attention to the intimacy and interdependency at the heart of political action instead.

The charge that Arendt overly individualizes and also masculinizes action is not new to Arendt scholarship. It is supported, in part, by her discussion of the Homeric Achilles in *The Human Condition,* which provides one of the only concrete examples of action in that book. There, Achilles emerges as a paragon of masculine heroism whose passion for greatness grants him a kind of immortality. Many feminist political theorists find fault with the "highly individualistic"[61] account of action that follows from Arendt's discussion of Achilles, even while it reveals two important related facets of action foregrounded in the narrative interpretation of Arendt's theory (elaborated by Benhabib and others), *viz.* action as self-actualizing and immortalizing. However, this "highly individualistic" account of heroic action epitomized by Arendt's Achilles, relies on privileging the importance of two aspects of the theory—the public realm and natality—at the expense of others. The idea that Achilles is a paragon of Arendtian action can only come from an agonistic account that forgets the importance of plurality.

Plurality is so central to Arendt's account that, as she puts it, action's "only limitation is the existence of other people."[62] And this to such an extent that "to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act."[63] *Natality,* the fact of birth underwriting the human capacity to begin something new, still relies on the condition of plurality, the *power* or "potentiality in being together," for its grounding—that is, as the groundless ground from which we "insert ourselves into the human world."[64] Again, in order to preserve the freedom and spontaneity of action, Arendt is careful to note that this "insertion" is not accomplished by the force of either necessity or utility, and while it "may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join,…it is never conditioned by them":

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[61] *Ibid.,* 194.
[62] *Ibid.,* 200-201.
[63] *Ibid.,* 188.
[64] *Ibid.,* 176.

> [I]ts impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein,* "to begin," "to lead," and eventually "to rule," indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*). Because they are *initium,* newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.[65]

Action then, is apparently able to interrupt natural processes in part because it does not depend on and is not impeded by any "matter," but only the existence of other human beings. The specifically political power that materializes via action, Arendt believes, "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse."[66] And yet, when Arendt de-emphasizes the miraculousness of natality—the seeming *ex nihilo* quality of action—and instead places this alongside plurality, does she merely replace one phantasm with another? In other words, is the immateriality of action, which "corresponds to the human condition of plurality," any better than the miraculousness of action, corresponding to the condition of natality? And in any case, is it right to say that plurality is immaterial when, in fact, plurality just means other people, other bodies?

"Plurality promotes the notion of a politics of shared differences," writes Mary Dietz, "Because Arendt introduces plurality as a political and not a metaphysical concept, she also locates this common condition in a discernible space which she calls 'the public' or 'the space of appearances.'"[67] While the determined publicity of plurality is perhaps meant to limit the confusion about action, as well as individual identity, as Dietz suggests, it is worth asking whether this is effective. Arendt is trying to make certain that individuals are seen, not just as agents, but as *particular* and irreplaceable agents. And yet, what kinds of things are relevant for specifying this particularity, according to Arendt? If acting means that you are human, according to Arendt, then "great" action

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[65] *Ibid.,* 177.
[66] *Ibid.,* 200.
[67] Mary Dietz, "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics," In *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory.* Eds. Mary Shanley and Carole Pateman. University Park: Penn State University Press, (1991): 236.

makes you unforgettable, an Achilles. Because plurality is apparently revealed in speech however, Arendt tends to be suspicious of anything "speechless," not only violence, which she famously and controversially condemns in "On Violence," but emotion and physiology as well. Ultimately, I will be suggesting throughout the course of this project that matter matters: both natality and plurality are embodied, somatic, and frequently messy.[68] These realities cannot be bracketed without severely damaging any fruit that politics might bear. Here, I agree with Pitkin, who writes, "It is no use banishing the body, economic concerns, or the social question from public life; we do not rid ourselves of their power in that way, but only impoverish public life."[69]

Even those aspects of individual self-actualization and immortality are only possible against this background of plurality. As Arendt puts it, there is a "special relation between action and being together," writes Arendt, "…only action is dependent upon the constant presence of others."[70] After all, other kinds of animals are also born, and yet they don't possess this talent for making beginnings. Action is therefore the enactment of a specifically *political* capacity, for which she thinks uniquely human capabilities are required. Not only are human beings distinct in their plurality, but they have the capacity to actively "distinguish themselves" – as Arendt says, through word and deed. That is, human beings are both equal in our difference and unique in our plurality: the result is a "community of equals" that marks the existence of a specifically political community and means that "everyone has the same capacity to act."

As I've argued, the agonist reading emphasizes examples that support Arendt's claim that, "the reason to act is situated in action's unique, individuating power, and in the self's agonal passion for

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[68] In this I follow Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* who writes, "Feminist and queer scholars have shown that emotions 'matter' for politics; emotions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well [*sic.*] worlds." Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, Routledge, 2015), 12.
[69] Pitkin, 347.
[70] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 23.

distinction, individuation, and outstanding achievement."[71] But as Seyla Benhabib points out, this view "limit[s] her concept of public space in ways which are not compatible with her own associative model."[72] While I don't follow Benhabib's desire to attach the space of the "associative model" to a procedural account of action as discourse, it is important to take seriously the broader point about how these concepts of space and action are co-implicated and co-constituted. There is an implicit assumption in parts of *The Human Condition,* and among some of its readers, that both the world and the conditions for action are already given—that the stage is built, the scene set in advance, onto which the (singular) hero need only advance. And yet, another tradition of Arendt interpretation, which I gesture to above, emphasizes the performative politics that comes into play when the existence of this infrastructure is exactly what is at issue. Indeed, sometimes the building and demanding and convening of the resources for politics *is itself* a political activity.

For many of her critics (who I discuss in detail in chapter two), Arendt impoverishes political life precisely because she equates it with "public" and sharply distinguishes it from "private." And yet, I want to emphasize that for Arendt, political space and political action are inextricable concepts. As Jennifer Ring puts it, "the relationship between space and action is mutually self-defining."[73] It is important to emphasize at this stage that the space of power that springs up "in-between" plural individuals—what Arendt will call the "space of appearance"—is, on my account, not affectively neutral, but a space of intimacy, often intensely so. As others have noted, an important shift occurs in Arendt's discussion of action around this notion of political space. It is not the case that action is only or best exemplified by an Achilles, or an Antigone, who bursts onto the *public* scene and causes a scene, nor is the space where politics happens necessarily a physical architecture like the agora, the

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[71] Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt,* 140.
[72] Seyla Benhabib, "Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space," *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1993): 104-105.
[73] Ring, 439.

voting booth, or the public square. Action stages itself. Physical, institutional settings for political participation are important, but a limited conception of political action theorized around these formal spaces takes their existence for granted, not to mention access to them. Following nstead, Arendt's formulation of "the space of appearance," action and space become mutually constituting[74]: in other words, a space for politics need not pre-exist the political action the constitutes it. The power that springs up between people when they act together is what creates that space for action—public, political space—where it did not previously exist. The space "in-between" individuals just *is* that space where potential action is actualized. Importantly, this means that what it looks like to be a political actor, on Arendt's account, is not limited to the hero Achilles who takes up space, but also the "conscious pariah" constitutively excluded from public life. Jennifer Ring notes that halfway through *The Human Condition,* Arendt makes a shift in her conception of political space:

> [She] reverses the relationship between the creation of physical location and the possibility of political action and insists that political action *itself* creates public space…Arendt tells us that "this space does not always exist" and is only created by *power,* an intangibility that people create *wherever they act together*. How are we to account for the sudden portability of the polis, from what appeared to be the unequivocal need for permanent place to what will become an equally important theme in her work: intangible power as the basis of political action?[75]

While many critics have charged Arendt with romanticizing the Greek polis, a space that could only be called "free" because women and slaves were unfree,[76] there is indeed an important shift in Arendt's conceptualization of action that de-emphasizes this aspect of physical or cultural infrastructure—even political membership—as necessary for action.[77] George Kateb writes that "it cannot be denied that

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[74] Ring, 440.
[75] *Ibid.,* 440.
[76] Arendt may have been aware of this—as Dietz argues—but it seems clear she didn't think that this fact was *politically* relevant. The consequences of this must be continually revisited. "Arendt is also aware that the freedom of the 'man of action' – the speaker of words and doer of deeds in the public realm – is made possible because of others who labor, fabricate, and produce. The man of action, as citizen, thus 'remains in dependence upon his fellow men.'" Dietz, 238.
[77] In *The Human Condition,* we might trace this shift (from the space of the public realm to the "space of appearance") to page 194: "Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis* and its structure the law; legislator and architect belonged in

her tone and emphasis changed somewhat" not just in *The Human Condition,* but between that work and her later writings.[78] It's noteworthy that this shift also tracks in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* where Arendt discusses the ballooning populations of stateless and exiled peoples alongside the withering of the public sphere. This suggests that Arendt was perhaps altering her account of action just as the (public) space of action was itself being altered and destroyed, adapting action to new conditions that had forced some actors outside every conceivable political space. It's worth repeating that, as a German-Jewish refugee, Arendt herself was one of those excluded from political membership. This keen personal experience of political exclusion (not synonymous with political powerlessness) is one reason why her work continues to speak, with insight, to many of the political challenges of today. Arendt's political subject, then, is not just the shining Achilles, but those hidden in the darkness of what she calls "the private realm." Arendt's political actor is not just shining Achilles, but all those hidden in the darkness of the private. Indeed, she had made the political "portable."

Starting here, from the concerns with political belonging, political space, and human dignity etched into Arendt's discussions of totalitarianism and statelessness, provides a deeper understanding of action than her account of the Ancient Greek *polis* is likely to yield. Much Arendt scholarship has been laboring under the misapprehension, it seems, that the "public" and the "political" are synonymous in Arendt's schema.[79] In fact, these concepts share an important affinity, but they do not completely overlap – a point that is more than implied in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* where Arendt theorizes action as a *right to have rights.* As I have written elsewhere, the right to have rights does not develop a substantive or positive rights theory as much as "a theory of political action on the scene of

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the same category. But these tangible entities themselves were not the content of politics (not Athens, but the Athenians, were the *polis*)…"

[78] "Yet it cannot be denied that her tone and emphasis changed somewhat in her later writings. Politics as the will to heroic greatness, to glory, politics as agon, remains with her when she speaks of modern revolutions, but she makes room for the more modest, almost nameless politics of the councils or civil disobedience. The important point is that 'the existential supremacy of political action,' as I have called it, shows itself equally in ancient and modern action whether or not the agon is present." Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil,* 7.

[79] Pitkin, 328.

statelessness and diaspora."[80] This is a formulation of political action that does not depend on the existence of any particular architectural space: "If Arendt's account of the political is architectural in the sense that it describes a particular account of space—of public political life and private social life—then it must also be understood to describe the birth of the radically new between persons, that which is *boundless,* because it precisely exceeds our constructions of space, and interrupts what is expected and common. This second strain of Arendt interpretation is at least as important as the first…"[81] Others, including Judith Butler, have recently remarked on this as well:

> It is both problematic and interesting that, for Arendt, the space of appearance is not only an architectural given: "the space of appearance comes into being," she writes, "wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm may be organized." In other words, this space of appearance is not a location that can be separated from the plural action that brings it about; it is not there outside of the action that invokes and constitutes it.[82]

For this account of action, the idea that the public realm or space of appearance is "only an architectural given," "suggests a certain inflexibility at odds with Arendt's theorization of action's boundlessness, unpredictability, and world-making potential in *The Human Condition*. Indeed, political agency characteristically confounds political space; it gives rise to and reveals modes of belonging that are not strictly spatial and not necessarily statist."[83] Again, interpreting Arendt's theory of action as one that requires the existence of either a public realm—that is, an actual physical space—or political membership in some kind of nation-state, is only relevant if what you want is to exclude all those people who lack these formal infrastructures from the possibility of performing political acts or to disqualify certain kinds of activity from a definition of the "properly political." Although Arendt's

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[80] Katherine Howard, "The 'Right to Have Rights' 65 Years Later: Justice Beyond Humanitarianism, Politics Beyond Sovereignty," *Global Justice: Theory, Practice, Rhetoric* 10, no. 1 (2017): 80.
[81] *Ibid.,* 85.
[82] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* 77.
[83] Howard, 86.

Greco-account of politics often supports these conclusions, there is little indication that this was the account of political action that she ultimately endorsed. Ring writes, "Indeed, in 'dark times,' freedom itself may have to go underground. The public space associated with self-revelation and light may only be found in hiding places."[84] On this account, the exiled and downtrodden are proper political subjects with all the same potentialities for action, despite their formal exclusion. And simultaneously, various *modes* of political action moving outside or against the formal mechanisms of the state, including popular protest, *are* properly political on this view.

It is an unfortunate misconception that, for Arendt, politics and the public realm are synonymous, or that action, in her view, only aims at individual greatness and immortality. There is a good example in Arendt's early work that demonstrates just how she meant to conceive the portability of her politics. Indeed, we shouldn't forget that Arendt's first book was not a work of philosophy, but a biography—the biography of a 19th century Jewish woman, Rahel Vernhagen. Vernhagen, a person for whom robust participation in public affairs was impossible due to sexism and antisemitism, hosted the most important intellectual salon of the time in the "privacy" of her living room, inadvertently creating a highly political, yet intimate space where public affairs could nevertheless be staged. Vernhagen's salons were significant for Arendt because they point to the potential that exists in being together, the potential, that is, to create a political space out of exile and exclusion—a space for "action in concert." Recalling this work on Vernhagen, it is no wonder that some feminist political theorists would use Arendt's account to theorize the politics of feminist consciousness-raising meetings, for instance.[85]

However, as Arendt would quickly warn us, the intimacy that arises out of the human condition of plurality is also a site of perplexity and potential calamity. As Arendt writes, "The

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[84] Ring, 443. For examples of the public space of hiding places, see Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Politics of Small Things: The Power of the Powerless in Dark Times,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
[85] See Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005

calamities of action (unpredictability, irreversibility, and anonymity) all arise from the human condition of plurality, which is the condition sine qua non for that space of appearance which is the public realm."[86] Therefore, the very condition for the possibility of action—plurality—also implies certain "disabilities of nonsovereignty."[87] Action, remember, is like the inexact magic of the sorcerer who will always remain an apprentice: as actors, we have little in the way of control, or even knowledge, to offer against the boundless and unpredictable calamities that living together, affecting and being affected by one another, bring to action. From Plato to Hobbes and beyond, authoritarian styles of governance—modeled on the patriarch's uncontestable rule of the household—were designed to master the "frailty of action."[88] That is, to introduce a system or "strong man"—a master magician—endowed with the power to control action. Arendt, of course, views this hierarchical enforcement of authority as illegitimate as well as misguided: It denies the basic non-sovereignty at the heart of political experience which denotes both the risk and promise of being together. The spontaneity of action in concert is still miraculous whether it ends in triumph or disaster.

Despite her insistence that *all* action is "action in concert," Arendt maintains that "only individuals act." This implies a relational account of agency that Arendt does not adequately theorize, moving between the individualizing function of natality and the collective aspect of plurality. The complex negotiation between the individual and the plural inherent in what Arendt calls "the web of human relationships" constitutes the basis of action's most important products: freedom and worldliness. And yet, while freedom and worldliness depend on plurality, the "haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents"[89] introduced above also poses an acute

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[86] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 220.
[87] *Ibid.,* 236.
[88] "It is as though they [Plato and Aristotle] had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome, there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs." Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 195.
[89] *Ibid.,* 220.

problem, both politically and conceptually. Arendt suggests that while we may be tempted to figure natality as an act of sovereignty, the moment we do anything at all, we *un*do that fantasy of sovereignty:

> [We] have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act. All this is reason enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom, which, by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done. Nowhere...does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man.[90]

The "impossibility of remaining the unique masters of what [we] do,"[91] I want to argue, requires that we rethink certain foundational questions related to agency, subject formation, and moral responsibility. As I will show in section three, this movement between doing and suffering is decisive for Arendt; in terms of "what action in concert *feels* like," it suggests that the experience of non-sovereignty is felt as a heightened vulnerability to suffering and anxiety.

Not only are the outcomes of action unknown, but its origins are unknowable. The possibility of theorizing action is encumbered by this inability to trace the calamities of action back to a discrete source. "Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author."[92] Even if we accept the paradox that all action is plural, but only individuals act, even if we can trace a deed back to a single individual, that individual is still not univocal. Rather, agents have

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[90] *Ibid.,* 233.
[91] *Ibid.,* 244.
[92] *Ibid.,* 184.

their own plurality and opacity. The dependency and plurality of action is reflected in Arendt's account of selfhood precisely because action is characteristically revelatory: the person of the actor is *revealed* in her acts. Arendt's public, performatively constituted self is thus fundamentally contingent and unstable, as well as necessarily ignorant of so much about *who* she is: Again, "there is to be no 'being' behind this doing. The doing, the performance, is everything."[93] This resonates powerfully with Judith Butler's later formulation: "there is no doer behind the deed." The difficulty that all this poses for action might be summarized as follows: "[H]e who acts never quite knows what he is doing."[94] Apparently, the characteristic "spontaneity" and unpredictability of action buries the possibility of ever knowing precisely why action arises. And yet, I think we should be able to say more than we currently can about *how* we are roused to act.

Arendt confronts the seeming paradox between individual initiative and common endeavor by writing in *The Human Condition,* "Here it seems as though each action were divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by 'bearing' and 'finishing' the enterprise, by seeing it through."[95] Action, it seems, thus emerges as the product of individual courage and collective collaboration, making agency, as one scholar puts it, a "socially distributed enterprise" such that "others become the agents of the individual's action."[96] This account of agency challenges the idea that our heroes are ever autonomous or self-sufficient and marks as untenable the related assumption that if one is "courageous," it is only on account of certain private emotional resources performed as an act of sovereign will. My challenge to Arendt would be to ask whether individual courage, and the individual reserves of strength that supply it, are not perhaps better

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[93] Honig in Honig ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt,* 138.
[94] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 233.
[95] *Ibid.,* 189.
[96] Sharon Krause, "Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics," *Political Theory* 39, no. 3 (June 2011): 308.

understood as likewise "socially distributed," indeed, differentially produced and differentially distributed. How does Arendt account, not for the capacity to act, but for the conditions underpinning the enactment of action, the fact that action materializes in a given case and not another? In the next section, I will discuss three sites where she attempts to ground the enactment of action and explain why I believe each is inadequate. Following this, I will propose an alternative and the challenges facing it.

II. Action-theory and the problem of enactment

a. Courage

> "The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact…present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own. And this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self."
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> Arendt, *The Human Condition*[97]

In her depiction of the noncitizen mass protests that took place in the U.S. in 2006, Cristina Beltrán emphasizes the passion for heroism and distinctness that is, referencing Arendt, constitutive of political action.[98] Implicit in the agonistic account of action that Beltrán cites is the political emotion that she calls "courage." Here, courage can be understood, in Arendt's terms, as an urge to appear as a singular and distinct individual, to pursue glory and greatness, and a longing for "public happiness." As Beltrán writes, "By appearing in public, marchers risked being photographed, arrested, and even

[97] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 186.

[98] My view diverges from Beltrán here: In her opinion, *The Human Condition*'s account of political action as the pursuit of greatness is a more apt description than the treatment of action she develops in *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* While I agree that the situation of undocumented immigrants is significantly distinct from the situation of stateless peoples, I take issue with her claim that Arendt "highlights the vulnerability of the stateless but not their capacity for action" (p. 604) in *Origins.* This overlooks the importance of "the right to have rights" as its own action-theory.

deported. Such risks of violence and anti-immigrant backlash are a stark reminder that courage is a central element of action, since such acts of public disclosure necessarily set in motion a chain of unpredictable events in ways both inspiring and hazardous."[99] The potentialities of action, their promise and hazard, have already been elaborated above. What Beltrán points us to are the risks associated with the particular visibility, and therefore vulnerabilities, inherent to political action not only because one has to rely on uncertain partnerships (with others who I may not know or trust), but also because action requires self-exposure in public. The risks associated with this self-exposure, as Beltrán rightly emphasizes, are differentially distributed depending on one's gender, race, sexual, national, and other identities. For some more than others, then, political action requires the negotiation of vulnerability, exposure, and risk – a constant negotiation that colors the psychology and physiology of action. Could the "urge to appear," or *courage,* be an adequate way of understanding how action happens on Arendt's account, as well as the differential vulnerabilities associated with it?

Given what we already know about the risks that attend action (and for some, the risk of simply being in public), this question asks us to consider how anyone at all might be moved to make that transition from the private into the public political realm and what would motivate this movement. Arendt herself refers to "the courage that lies at the root of action" as what is needed to "cross the gulf" between the private and public realms. For her, courage is necessary precisely because the decision to enter the public realm entails a willingness to expose oneself, to make oneself vulnerable to the gaze and whims of others. She associates courage with "the striving for immortality which originally had been the spring and center of the *vita activa.*"[100] Beltrán and others, including Bonnie Honig, Linda Zerilli, and Chantal Mouffe, who endorse an agonist conception of politics, emphasize this struggle for distinction and immortality. For them, politics consists in the specifically nonviolent

[99] Beltrán, 606.
[100] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 21.

conflict between equals on issues of common concern. This struggle is both groundless and aimless, in the Arendtian sense, and indeed, it is unending – the agonist conception leads us to important democratic ideals, such as the concepts of constitutional perfectionism or permanent revolution.

And yet, according to Arendt's concept of plurality, the urge to appear initially corresponds with an urge to appear *as distinct.*[101] That is, because plurality is defined by both equality and distinctness, and because distinctness can only be won in the public realm, action on this view is about the competition among and against others for distinction. *Who* we are as distinct individuals is revealed in what we *do.*[102] Therefore, any action is always an act of exposure—it requires a *performance* through which we display ourselves to others and simultaneously become who we are. And exposure, because it entails risk, requires courage. Between these discussions of heroism, distinction, and greatness, Arendt installs the figure of Achilles as exemplar and consequently attributes the spontaneity of action to courage. However, Arendt does not give "the courage that lies at the root of action" a substantive treatment at any point. She alternately refers to it as an ethos, a passion, and a virtue, but the status of these three concepts is ambiguous, and their consequences for action, distinct. Arendt does make clear however, that courage is most relevant for the specifically Greek experience of *polis* life, where it is indeed "highly individualistic," as well as masculine.

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[101] "It is indeed as though everything that is alive—in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others—has an *urge to appear,* to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its 'inner self' but itself as an individual." Arendt, *The Life of the Mind,* Thinking, 29.

[102] "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and the sound of the voice. This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says or does....This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness. Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure….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." Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 179-180.

These descriptions do not translate well when applied to later iterations of the action-theory and do not apply particularly well to a feminist theory of political action. As Hanna Pitkin puts it, for the agonist view that makes use of courage,

> Arendt's citizens begin to resemble posturing little boys clamoring for attention ("Look at me! I'm the greatest!" "No, look at *me*!") and wanting to be reassured that they are brave, valuable, even real. (No wonder they feel unreal: they have left their bodies behind in the private realm.) Though Arendt was female, there is a lot of *machismo* in her vision. Unable to face their mortality and physical vulnerability, the men she describes strive endlessly to be superhuman, and, realizing they cannot achieve that goal, require endless reassurance from other in their anxious delusion.[103]

We need not be wedded to the view that, for instance, only men are courageous, in order to appreciate that courage and heroism, as a style of politics, is culturally masculine. Understanding how this is the case, in Arendt's work in particular, one could return to her construction of the private and public realms, the tasks associated with each, and the kinds of subjects who spend the majority of their lives there. Indeed, one difficulty of the conception that courage represents initiative is the consequence that those who do "cross the gulf" between the private and the public *are* courageous, *are* heroes. On the other hand, those committed to work of the so-called "household," can't be called courageous, but merely reinforce the boundaries delineating the private and public. We need to ask whether the attempts, by some feminist inheritors of Arendt's work, to recast the feminine political subject in the image of an Achilles, is anything more than the vindication of a masculine ideal. (A critique that Bonnie Honig[104] levels at Butler's treatment of Antigone in *Antigone's Claim*.)

Although this courage is more evident (or perhaps only more celebrated) in the grand heroism of figures like Achilles, Arendt emphasizes that:

> The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact…present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own. And this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present

[103] Pitkin, 338.

[104] See Bonnie Honig, *Antigone Interrupted,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

> in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self.[105]

"Leaving one's private hiding place" in order to initiate any act, big or small, is courageous. Although this qualification speaks to some concerns about the elitist and masculinist implications of Arendt's action-theory, there remains a question about whether her approach is overly individualistic. Referring to Arendt's emphasis on courage, Jennifer Ring writes, "What we are seeing in Arendt's work is a thread of individualism that sometimes appears to conflict with the value she places on common endeavors." She goes on to explain, "The individualism is her guarantee against the encroachment of totalitarianism, which she describes as the elimination of space between people."[106] If this is a critique, Arendt seems willing to accept it. She writes,

> No doubt this concept of action is highly individualistic, as we would say today. It stresses the urge toward self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors and therefore remains relatively untouched by the predicament of unpredictability. As such it became the prototype of action for Greek antiquity and influenced, in the form of the so-called agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one's self in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city-states.[107]

Indeed, the vibrant political participation that characterized the agora is fundamental for thinkers like Honig and Zerilli who emphasize the agonal action-theory of freedom and feminism.

So does the heroic individualism of the Greek conception in fact "conflict with the value she places on common endeavors" as Ring suggests? Arendt herself, as well as many of her inheritors, don't seem to think so. Not only does Arendt acknowledge the existence of a quieter courage "present in a willingness to act and speak at all," but she actually breaks political action into two distinct stages, one individual and one plural. In the essay "Introduction into Politics," she reiterates that "action can never occur in isolation," specifying that we depend on the presence of others to carry out our actions. "But," she says, "this is in fact only one stage of action[…] It is preceded by the beginning, the *archein;*

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[105] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 186.
[106] Ring, 444.
[107] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 194.

but such initiative, which determines who will be the leader or *archon,* the *primus inter pares,* really depends on an individual and his courage to embark on an enterprise."[108] She also makes this claim in *The Human Condition,* writing, "Here it seems as though each action were divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by 'bearing' and 'finishing' the enterprise, by seeing it through."[109] Recall that for Arendt, acts are not judged by moral standards—that is, not in terms of "virtue," but *virtuosity*. Indeed, courage was considered "the political virtue par excellence" precisely because it displayed an urge to perform the kind of actions characterized by virtuosity, or *energeia* – think of the example of playing the violin, an activity for which the end and the means are the same (playing the violin well): we call someone who does this activity excellently *virtuoso.* Political action, for Arendt, subscribes to the same model. This kind of virtuosic action—that is, political action in the proper sense—"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, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*…Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation or its achievement."[110]

If courage plays a constitutive and motivating role in Arendt's theory however, it has to somehow be made compatible with "action in concert." To return to Ring's question: Is the thread of individualism introduced by "courage" in conflict with the emphasis Arendt elsewhere places on common endeavors as the very basis for "action in concert"? What does courage look like when it is not embodied by either an Achilles or an Antigone, but by many together, and does it still do the same work? While Beltrán draws our attention to this "dynamic of action and affect"[111] in her account of

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[108] Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," in *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 127-128.
[109] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 189.
[110] *Ibid.,* 205-206.
[111] Beltrán, 607.

contemporary non-citizen mass protest, she does not directly reckon with the fact that Arendt herself actually ignored the reality of this dynamic, nor does she explore how it works. Sharon Krause, whose work usefully brings together the political, the affective, and the corporeal, returns us to the passages quoted above by claiming that agency is a "socially distributed enterprise." In her article "Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics," Krause argues that,

> [I]ndividual agency never resides exclusively within the individual but depends on the action and reactions of other people. Human agency is socially distributed in the sense that "others become the agents of the individual's action" The self, however important, is never the sole source of agency. This account of the distributed, intersubjective quality of agency resonates with Hannah Arendt's depiction of human action. For Arendt, action involves more than just the doer. It is composed of two parts, "the beginning made by a single person" and "the achievement in which many join by 'bearing' and 'finishing' the enterprise"....Insofar as agency requires bearers, in is a distributed enterprise. Rather than being located exclusively within the individual, or construed simply as an internal capacity, agency is better understood as a product of the bodily encounters, self-understandings, and social interpretations through which one's identity finds affirmation in one's deeds.[112]

Krause goes on to use the example of Rosa Parks, whose famous act "was only fully realized through the recognition and subsequent acts of many other people...It's in large part because others were there to name what she did, to give it a determinate interpretation and articulate its public significance, that her action was 'finished' in Arendt's sense of the word." This example strikes me as distinctly relevant here because it provides a broader context for understanding our tendencies toward hero-worship – and makes the point that there is always a broader context, that there are always more "heroes" without whom the greatness and immortality of "the one" would not be possible. Indeed, as I will show in following chapters, the idea that the heroic actor is autonomous and self-sufficient is as untenable as the related assumption that she is "courageous" (and certainly she is) only on account of certain private emotional resources. I ask whether this individual courage and these individual reserves of strength are not perhaps better understood as similarly "socially distributed" and socially constituted.

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[112] Krause, "Bodies in Action," 308.

b. The Will

Although Hannah Arendt is perhaps best known in philosophy for her theory of action, it wasn't until her final book—*The Life of the Mind*—that she devoted serious energy to what she called "the spring of action," or, the Will. For the purposes of this inquiry, I read Arendt's discussion of "Willing" as the most direct attempt throughout her work to understand what moves us to act.

However, "direct" is a relative term. In *The Life of the Mind,* the account of Willing proceeds not as Arendt's own positive elaboration of the concept, but as a philosophical historiography of it. In other words, Arendt is less concerned with arriving at an account that describes how the will functions, and more with detailing how theories of the will have evolved in the history of philosophy. Indeed, the argument that comes through most clearly in the course of presenting this history is the claim that philosophy *cannot,* due to its inherent tendencies toward abstract theorizing, adequately or accurately account for the will, since this is only disclosed in the practical domain of experience. She believes this explains why philosophers, who are not well-oriented to the practical domain, struggle to understand the problem of the will or avoid it entirely – historically, she says, discussion about the will has been dominated by a struggle between free will and determinism. This, as she puts it, is one of the first challenges that accounts of the will are met with: "There is, first, the ever-recurring disbelief in the very existence of the faculty. The Will is suspected of being a mere illusion, a phantasm of consciousness, a kind of delusion inherent in consciousness' very structure."[113]

While many philosophers deny the existence of the faculty, others—Arendt notes Hobbes and Spinoza—acknowledge its existence, but argue that the subjective experience of a *freedom* of the will is illusory. As Suzanne Jacobitti notes, at the same time that Arendt was writing, contemporary

[113] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind,* 23.

philosophers like Ryle and Wittgenstein were subjecting the will to "devastating criticism." According to Jacobitti, Arendt "explicitly dismiss[es] the criticism of [these and other] philosophers. To Arendt, what counts is our direct *experiences* of the will, not what philosophers have said about it; and these experiences, she insists, constitute compelling evidence for the existence of the will."[114] The fact that the vast majority of philosophers have discounted this "evidence" does not dissuade Arendt. Quite the contrary. As Jacobitti puts it, "The philosophers of radically different persuasions on other matters have come to such similar conclusions about the will confirms, in Arendt's view, her suspicion that these conclusions are due to the unwarranted bias of the thinker's perspective."[115] This wholesale suspicion, and even opposition, to the thinker's perspective ("men of thought," in Arendt's terms) is significant for practical and philosophical reasons. As Jerome Kohn puts it:

> It is, I think, the phenomenal nature of the autonomous faculty of the will, the faculty that enables us to act into the future, that lies at the heart of Arendt's criticism of philosophy. She is critical of philosophy—not merely, or especially, of past philosophies, of philosophies to date—but of the very enterprise itself insofar as it presupposes, or just takes for granted, any relation between its analyses of ethical or political theorems and the actual goings-on of this world. It is in this sense, then, that one must take her seriously when she says that she has "neither claim nor ambition to be a philosopher."[116]

Philosophers mistakenly take for granted that they are accounting for "the actual goings-on of this world," such as the phenomenal nature of the will, when in fact, and when it comes down to it, they are merely dismissing it. As I've said earlier, it's unclear where the fact that Arendt had "neither claim nor ambition to be a philosopher" exactly leaves us in terms of assessing her own contributions. At this point, it only means that she was willing to invest serious faith in the idea of a free and autonomous willing function when almost no other philosopher was, and that she based this faith in nothing but the self-conscious experience of what happens when we act.

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[114] Suzanne Jacobitti, "Hannah Arendt and the Will," *Political Theory* 16, no. 1 (Feb., 1988): 54.
[115] *Ibid.,* 55.
[116] Kohn, 110.

Very like the account of action, she identifies the will with spontaneity, specifically (following Kant) "the power of *spontaneously* beginning a series of successive things or states."[117] "The freedom of spontaneity," Arendt writes, "is part and parcel of the human condition. Its mental organ is the Will."[118] Jacobitti explains that the will is, for Arendt, "the faculty by which we create and choose among alternative projects for the future and the faculty by which we make those projects real by initiating action in the world."[119] Thus, the will is supposed to be a faculty of *initiating* action. And it is not just the "spring of action," it is a specifically *mental* spring. This introduces a number of problems that Arendt never extricates herself from, and which throw considerable doubt on the possibility that Willing is indeed supposed to serve as a power for enacting action in Arendt's formulation.[120] As Jacobitti puts it, "This claim that the will must be entirely spontaneous, and hence autonomous of thinking and reason, is clearly one of the most troublesome of Arendt's ideas and is, I believe the source of many of her difficulties…It prevents her from ever explaining how thought can affect action."[121]

Willing, like the other two mental faculties of Thinking and Judging, is autonomous, unconditioned, and un-worldly. Arendt's insistence that Willing is autonomous not only means that it is separate from Thinking and Judging—hence the bias of Thinking, that it is unable to "think" willing—but that it is sharply separated from our acting in the world, as well as from the senses through which we perceive the world.[122] (Indeed, all of the *vita contemplativa,,* as Arendt calls the trio of mental

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[117] Jacobitti, 59. In footnotes (fns. 48 and 67), Jacobitti acknowledges that Arendt's late work on willing mimics, in some ways, the structure of her theory of action in earlier works. Arendt "concludes that 'the freedom of spontaneity is part and parcel of the human condition. Its mental organ is the Will'" and that, "There are similar difficulties in Arendt's earlier work, although she did not then attribute action to the will. Then it was action itself, rather than the will, which was spontaneous."

[118] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind,* 110.

[119] Jacobitti, 59.

[120] *Ibid.,* 48.

[121] *Ibid.,* 65.

[122] *Ibid.,* 57. "Willing is defined, along with thinking and judging, as a *mental* faculty or activity. In insisting on the mental nature of these faculties—that is, by insisting that they belong to the mind and not to the body or soul—Arendt wishes to emphasize their active and autonomous nature. That is to say, these faculties are actively self-determined; they are not caused or determined by anything external to them. Above all, the mind is not determined by the causal chains and

activities Thinking-Willing-Judging, is practically and conceptually autonomous from the *vita activa,* the trio of worldly activities Labor-Work-Action.) The mental activities, including willing, are autonomous in two important senses: first, they are "actively self-determined," i.e., nothing external to the mental faculties themselves determines how they are directed, including natural factors and causal chains. This is essential for providing for the freedom of the will (and thought and judgment), as well as the spontaneity of willing, which precisely interrupts ongoing processes (e.g., biological processes) and causal chains. And second, Arendt insists that the will "decides," and then *disappears* as soon as action begins. While this gap preserves the autonomy of the will as a mental faculty, it raises an inevitable question about how exactly willing and acting are related. Jacobitti, like me, is frustrated with how Arendt leaves this: "It is also not clear how Arendt's will is related to action, how the willing ego relates to the self that appears in the world….[M]ental activities 'can never directly change reality.' How, then, can the will be the 'spring of action'? How can it set off a new series of events in the world?"[123]

Here again, we arrive at a point where Arendt's desire to preserve the characteristic freedom and spontaneity of action runs up against a deep uncertainty in her overall theory about how this freedom can be maintained alongside nonsovereignty. For Jacobitti, Arendt's work requires a more developed account of selfhood to make sense of the relation between will and action. However, this view goes against that of others, including Linda Zerilli (who I discuss below) who suggests that "plurality" can shore up worries about selfhood. Jacobitti argues that perhaps Arendt's emphasis on the autonomy of the faculties is too stringent and that the account as a whole would be more cogent if she would allow the will to be shaped by thinking. For my own part, I will argue for the importance

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conditions that operate in the natural world…Before mental activity can take place, there must be a certain disengagement from the world to permit the necessary autonomy. For this to occur, it is necessary for the mind to 'withdraw' from the world. The world (i.e., immediate sensory experience) must not be what is 'present' to the mind; instead, what is present to the mind are what Arendt calls 'thought-objects.'"

[123] *Ibid.*, 64.

of emotion – a "faculty" neither mental, nor strictly bodily, and which Arendt attributes no importance anywhere in this architectural schema.

c. Bearing and Suffering

> "Both psychology, the discipline of adjusting human life to the desert, and totalitarian movements, the sandstorms in which false or pseudo-action suddenly bursts forth from deathlike quiet, present imminent danger to the two human faculties that patiently enable us to transform the desert rather than ourselves, the conjoined faculties of passion and action. It is true that when caught up in totalitarian movements or the adjustments of modern psychology we suffer less; we lose the faculty of suffering and with it the virtue of endurance. Only those who can endure the passion of living under desert conditions can be trusted to summon up in themselves the courage that lies at the root of action, of becoming an active being."
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> Arendt, "Epilogue" from *The Promise of Politics*[124]

The "burden of irreversibility and unpredictability" that characterizes all action means that the question is perhaps not so much how we enact action, but how we suffer and endure it. In the earlier section on "Courage," I noted that Arendt sometimes describes action as a set of two moments: "the courage that lies at the root of action" and the presence of others who "bear and complete" what is put into motion. To some extent, this interpretation makes sense of the seemingly contradictory claim that while "only individuals act," all action is still "action in concert."[125] How we are meant to understand the gap between the first and second moments is unclear: for her part, Arendt explicitly states that it is the second stage that is "the most politically important stage," and implies that the two stages are not simultaneous, but successive ("[the second stage] is preceded by the beginning, the

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[124] Arendt, *The Promise of Politics,* 202.

[125] "While contradiction is perhaps not the right word, Arendt's approach to the question of action (by far the question that fascinated her most) remains, at the very least, ambiguous. She insists, for instance, that only individuals can act; no supraindividual entity – neither history nor humanity nor classes nor nations – can be said to possess the capacity.....Thus, while action requires the existence of singular beings, that singularity is only given through plurality. It relies on something that would seem to threaten it; it needs the very thing that would seem to dissolve it. It has shape and effectivity exactly inasmuch as it remains indeterminate, indistinct and diffuse." Charles Barbour and Magdalena Zolgos, *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt,* eds. Anna Yeatman, Philip Hansen, Magdalena Zolgos, and Charles Barbour, New York: Continuum International, 2011: p. 1.

archein…").[126] And yet, I believe that Arendt neglects the extent to which we still depend on the presence of others even in that first stage, how even courage is not just individual, but still relies on others in its willingness to begin and in the knowledge that beginning also means enduring. This is only hinted at in *The Human Condition,* where the faculties of promising and forgiving are cast as the only remedies for the "disabilities of action," as themselves the sort of action that specifically require our collaboration with others.[127] However, it is to what Arendt refers to as "the faculty of suffering" that I turn in order to better understand how bearing and suffering action might actually ground the ability to act in both its so-called stages.

Arendt's reflections on Jewishness, refugees, and "dark times" that compose her more journalistic-style essays (collected in *Essays in Understanding* and *The Jewish Writings)* contain this conception of action as bearing and suffering, responsibility and solidarity. They suggest a different set of conditions and factors underlying action that her traditionally philosophical works do not directly consider. By turning to these texts, we may attempt to answer an important question about how individuals ever find themselves "in concert" in the first place.

In "We Refugees," an article written in 1943 for a small Jewish periodical, Arendt suggests a separate accounting of action that arises out of the suffering and solidarity of Jewish people and their "pariahdom" by reflecting on the specifically Jewish experiences of alienation, despair, and the optimistic, but ultimately doomed, drive for assimilation among post-WWII immigrant Jews. Arendt recalls how, pressed by the exigencies of a shared situation, the detainees of a French internment camp understood both their captivity and the possibility of action as a common project. She writes,

> At the camp of Gurs, for instance, where I had the opportunity of spending some time, I heard only once about suicide, and that was the suggestion of a collective action, apparently a kind of protest in order to vex the French. When some of us remarked

[126] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 127-128.
[127] *Ibid.,* 237.

> that we had been shipped there "*pour crever"* ["to burst"] in any case, the general mood turned suddenly into a violent courage to live.[128]

In fact, this isn't the whole story, although the rest is not widely-known. During a 1971 seminar, as one of those present at this seminar recalls,

> A student posed the question of why it was that more Jews had not resisted, rebelled, and fought back against the Nazis?...Arendt [responded that she] herself has [*sic.*] been arrested and sent to the Gurs internment camp in southwest France, to a section reserved for Jewish women. [The women] discussed among themselves whether there was some action they might take to extricate themselves and escape... Arendt and other leaders came up with a plan. They would send a delegation to the commandant, tell him that he has to release them—or they would all begin screaming and not stop until he did[...To] their astonishment, he agreed to release them—under a specific condition, namely that they had to leave in groups of two or three, because large numbers would be found out and captured. The delegation explained to the rest of the prisoners that and how they would be released, which required individual acts and risks. The vast majority of those women rejected the offer, feeling greater security in their sticking together, whereas they ended up in the concentration campus [*sic.*]. [O]nly about a dozen women, in small groups, left the Gurs camp. One day decades later Arendt said she was on a Paris Metro and saw one of those who escaped with her; they nodded.[129]

A short time after Arendt's escape, those remaining at Gurs were transported to concentration camps – that order was signed by Adolf Eichmann.[130] Whether Arendt's eagerness to attend and report on Eichmann's infamous trial in 1961 was related to this fact seems likely.

I want to suggest that meditating on this example of action helps clarify the tension that I have been pointing to between natality, or initiative, and plurality. Specifically, the relevance of emotions like courage, fear, and indignation for identifying that tension. In contrast to the courage that Arendt points to in her discussion of Achilles, where courage references something closer to virtue or virtuosity that strives for individual greatness, in the example above, she points to the quiet courage of ordinary people. But *how* is it exactly that "the general mood turned suddenly into a violent courage to live"? How is it, in other words, that the collective feeling of that group of women, by virtue of

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[128] Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 268.

[129] Michael Murray, email to author, January 4, 2018.

[130] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 155.

being and plotting together, shifted from suicidal to a "violent courage to live"? The suggestion of a collective action and, indeed, the act of assembling to discuss *what they as a collective ought to do*, aroused an essential vitality. Given the natal implications of action, one can only guess that making their collective action a collective suicide became immediately distasteful.

What did they choose to do instead? They threatened to scream and not stop screaming. Recall that the vast majority of the group chose to stay together rather than risk leaving and dying alone. How should we understand this? Perhaps it is that tension, again, between the natal and the plural. In a broader sense, Arendt's account teaches that there is always a risk involved in action since visibility implies vulnerability. This is because we rely on uncertain partnerships when we act in concert (with others who I may not know or trust), but also because action requires self-exposure in public. And exposure, because it entails risk, requires courage. One need not be Antigone, or even Achilles, to own this courage: Indeed, Arendt acknowledges the existence of a quieter courage when she notes that the courage at the root of action is "present in a willingness to act and speak at all."[131]

As Arendt admitted more than once, the possibility of action under conditions of imminent terror represents an extreme case about which we should be sure not to judge harshly.[132] She was more interested, and more willing to discuss at length, the possibility of action under totalitarian regimes. In this context, "the faculty of suffering" operates not so much as an impetus for action as a condition for action. Unless we are willing and able to *bear* suffering, no action at all is possible. That is, the problem that we face with action is not just that we have to bear the burden (qua responsibility) of whatever we do, but we have to be willing to endure the pain of effects that we never expected or intended to cause. What Arendt finds dangerous here anesthesia: not that we would feel too much, but that we might feel too little of the necessary suffering and emotions that relates individuals to one

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[131] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 186.
[132] Arendt, "Letter to Gershom Scholem," in *The Jewish Writings,* 468-469.

another through action: "It is true that when caught up in totalitarian movements or the adjustments of modern psychology we suffer less," she writes, "we lose the faculty of suffering and with it the virtue of endurance. Only those who can endure the passion of living under desert conditions can be trusted to summon up in themselves the courage that lies at the root of action, of becoming an active being."[133] That is, denying ourselves the possibility of feeling reality is a way of being apolitical. And yet, Arendt is at the same time convinced that emotion, or perhaps only certain emotions, are also apolitical. As Deborah Nelson explains in an article on the similarities between Arendt and her longtime friend, the writer Mary McCarthy,

> Both [Arendt and McCarthy] were drawn to suffering as a problem to be explored and yet remained deeply suspicious of its attractions. It is easy to confuse their toughness with indifference or callousness, but that would be to misconstrue their project. They sought not relief from pain but heightened sensitivity to what they called *reality*. Perversely or not, they imagined the consolations for pain in intimacy, empathy, and solidarity as *anesthetic*. Their toleration of pain—indeed, their insistence on its ordinariness—is a part of their eccentricity…. [T]hey believed that facing reality set in motion a process of alteration and self-alteration that was a precondition of social change….Remaining alone *while* sharing the world with others left the individual in a condition of maximum exposure to cold, hard facts. It is this exposure that they sought to preserve.[134]

"Remaining alone *while* sharing the world with others" is, I take it, a good attempt to formulate what Arendt believed was at issue in the idea of political action. The structure of political action is both individual and plural: only the individual acts, but always in concert; the act is both constitutive and revelatory of the particularity of the individual actor, but what is revealed is precisely her relationality, the "web of relations"; the meaning and raison d'être of all politics is freedom, which is, however, specifically nonsovereign. Arendt understood the temptation to take refuge in our intimacies with others but averred that "when the chips are down"—when the time has come to act—these ties ought to be cut or bracketed. And yet, how does the individual left alone "in a condition of maximum

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[133] Arendt, "Epilogue," in *The Promise of Politics,* 202.
[134] Deborah Nelson, "The Virtues of Heartlessness: Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and the Anesthetics of Empathy," *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 88.

exposure to cold, hard facts" act? Why is it that we lose the faculty of suffering when we are caught up in totalitarian movements? To understand this, one needs to remember that for Arendt, totalitarianism as a socio-political structure is characterized by the destruction of that space "in-between" individuals that allows for the crucial space where action unfolds. In this sense, disavowing the pathos of suffering precludes the very possibility of "becoming an active being."

Arendt's story of her escape from Gurs makes sense of her suggestion that in any collective action, there is nevertheless a crucial moment when one must find for herself "the courage that lies at the root of action," to burst forth, and at the same moment, to become the particular individual in relation to others who she is. Arendt affirms the necessity of our intimacies with others, but still avers that "when the chips are down," action is still an individual matter. I propose, however, that this "courage that lies at the root of action" is not an individual matter at all—the affective resources from which this courage draws are not endogenous, they do not pre-exist the act itself or constitute a special quality already residing in the personality of the actor. These resources are, in my view, the affective inter-corporeal activity of acting itself, "the diamond point" that Arendt unfairly dismisses in her analysis of the French Revolution. I want to suggest in chapter two that contrary to the anti-woman and anti-poor theory of emotion we get in Arendt's discussion of revolutionary action, a theory that turns out to be little more than a reactionary antibiologism, there is another tradition of theorizing emotion that arises out of Arendt's personal reflections on the *experience* of action excerpted above. Moreover, taking these reflections seriously is a strategy that resonates with Arendt's own insights concerning the problem of accessing these thoroughly practical, subjective, and embodied experiences. In light of this, considerations about the empowering effects/affects of being with others, as well as the terror of being alone, need to be raised anew if we want to understand what stalls and stirs action. What suffers and therefore endures?

III. Action and the crisis of agency

> "If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce."[135]

In the introduction to her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom,* Linda Zerilli argues that the central problem shaping debates in third-wave feminism is "the subject question." By this, she means questions surrounding who is the subject of feminism and framed by broader conversations in post-structuralism about what makes and unmakes contemporary subjecthood. Bearing on this "subject question," the debates occasioned by Judith Butler's post-structuralist gender theory were particularly fierce, and so were the interventions (and receptions) of women of color feminists who criticized the middle-class, academic, whiteness—at once universalizing and exclusionary—of mainstream feminisms. In both cases, these feminist interventions triggered anxieties among second-wave feminists that "woman" would not survive as a coherent category, and that this process of dissolution would be harmful to the political and other claims of those for whom "woman" was an important, often their only, concept of positive identification. Many third-wave feminists, on the other hand, worried about the exclusionary logic, and frequently violence, of this category of identification, and embraced pluralizing concepts of identity instead. But as Zerilli writes:

> Although feminist theorists of the third wave have been deeply critical of the fantasy of sovereignty (be it in the form of Woman in the singular or women as a unified group), they could not really think plurality without occasioning a crisis of agency. I said earlier that agency is a false problem that leads us to misunderstand what we do when we act politically. But the problem is false because it is posed within a subject-centered frame. That frame occludes a way of responding to the crisis of agency that would not require a denial of plurality. This is where third wave feminism arrives at an impasse: how to take account of plurality (differences among women) without relinquishing the capacity to act politically. For surely action in concert, a feminist might object, must involve *some* sense of agency. If we had no sense of agency when we act politically, why would we so act?[136]

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[135] Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future,* 151.
[136] Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom,* 17.

In other words, the feminist project to undo sovereignty—that is, to pluralize the conceptions of women and feminism—immediately encounters a problem of action and agency so that, "it seems as if the paradox of subject formation in installed as a vicious cycle of agency at the heart of politics."[137] How does a community of plural individuals act in the absence of agency? Must we, as Zerilli suggests, give up agency just as we are extricated from the "fantasy of sovereignty"? Is "agency" just another way of naming the illusion of self-mastery that many, especially Arendt, have attached to the concept of sovereignty? Or might we still recover a non-sovereign account of agency – one that does not shy away from the so-called "calamities of action," but embraces them?

For writers like Zerilli, but also Bonnie Honig, Suzanne Jacobitti, and others, the problem of the subject occasions a "crisis of agency" in democratic theory, as well as (for Zerilli) an "impasse" among feminist theorists. Zerilli argues that despite Arendt's distaste for everything related to "the woman question," she remains *the* figure who can steer us beyond the "impasse" at the heart of contemporary feminist theory and "aid us in restarting the critical dialogue between [democratic theory] and feminism."[138] How could this be the case? She argues that while feminism has labored under the "subject problem," Arendt's philosophy—her account of both selfhood and politics as plural—successfully shakes off the bonds of sovereignty. Zerilli writes,

> Wherever feminists have focused on the question of whether political agency is possible in the absence of the "what" (for example, an identity such as "women"), Arendt insists that politics is not about the "what" and agency, but always about the "who" and nonsovereignty. By contrast with the feminist sense of crisis that emerged in relation to the critique of the subject, Arendt holds that politics, the realm of action, is possible *only* on the condition that there is *no* agent who can begin a process and more or less control its outcome, use a means toward an end. Refuting claims to mastery, Arendt argues not (as Butler following Nietzsche did) that "there is no doer behind the deed," but that the deed, once done, has effects beyond the doer's control….Foregrounded in Arendt's account of action is something less about the *subject* (for example, its stability/instability or its capacity/noncapacity for agency) than

[137] *Ibid.,* 12.
[138] *Ibid.,* 30.

> about the *world* (for example its contingency) into which the subject is arbitrarily thrown and into which it acts.[139]

For Arendt, the shift in emphasis from subject to world is distinctly political, but how it is political in the absence of factors related to particularly embodied experiences of being in the world invites important contemporary debates around "identity politics" that Zerilli seems to bracket (and that I will explore in chapter two). For now, I want to focus on how this shift from subject to world entails another consequence that Zerilli does not sufficiently explore: Though she asks the question, "If we had no sense of agency when we act politically, why would we so act?", Zerilli does not really attempt to answer it. As Suzanne Jacobitti raised the question earlier in relation to the Will, it is "not clear how Arendt's will is related to action, how the willing ego relates to the self that appears in the world,"

> Arendt insists adamantly that the will must be absolutely autonomous. "The decision the will arrives at can never be derived from the mechanics of desire or the deliberations of the intellect that may precede it. The will is either an organ of free spontaneity that interrupts all causal chains of motivation that would bind it or it is nothing but an illusion. In respect of desire, on one hand, and to reason, on the other, the will acts like 'a kind of *coup d'état.*'" But what can it mean for the will to act as a coup d'état? From whence does this will come? Does it act as a coup d'état also to the person or self whose will it is? What is the relation of the self to the will?[140]

Whether it is formulated as a question of agency, will, or something else entirely, there is some important substance lacking in Arendt's account between subject and action that Zerilli's avowal of nonsovereignty does not sufficiently shore up.

There is indeed a certain crisis of agency when, despite the fact that the presence of others who participate in acting is the "most politically important stage" of action, Arendt continually insists that the initiative for *beginning* action still rests with the individual, that it "really depends on an individual and his courage to embark on an enterprise."[141] In this case, if Jacobitti is right, the fact that Arendt does not provide a coherent conception of self is indeed problematic. What is courage? What

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[139] *Ibid.,* 13-14.
[140] Jacobitti, 62-64.
[141] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 127-128.

are its conditions? If action unleashes its calamities in ways that are irreversible and unpredictable, then courage, whatever its provocations, immediately entails responsibility. Courage must include a willingness to bear the burdens of responsibility and of its aftermath – both glory and shame. It is on the basis of worldly contingency and its risks that we act, if we act at all. This inescapable burden of responsibility simply is, for Arendt, the burden of being human. It is, I believe, in this mood, that Arendt once wrote in an essay called "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility":

> For many years now we have met Germans who declare that they are ashamed of being Germans. I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human. This elemental shame, which many people of the most various nationalities share with one another today, is what finally is left of our sense of international solidarity... [It] becomes daily clearer how great a burden mankind is for man.[142]

This *elemental shame,* as she calls it, is the burden of action.

And as Arendt frequently alludes, the great "burden mankind is for man" is also the reason why non-action is so common and why command and obedience, as a style of political governance, is so tempting. In the first case, we display a desire to avoid the "calamities of action" and on the other, we attempt to control action – both are kinds of bad faith. Instead, the "calamities of action" are the price we pay for freedom and "[the] only salvation from this kind of freedom seems to lie in non-acting, in abstention from the whole realm of human affairs as the only means to safeguard one's sovereignty and integrity as a person."[143]

On Arendt's own account, we "bear and complete" what others put into motion, and this constant doing and suffering is a web that we can never untangle. As she writes, "Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in

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[142] Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," in *Essays in Understanding,* 131.
[143] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 204.

the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author."[144] The idea that any *doing* at all implies constant, simultaneous *suffering* means that the passions—and yes, the intimacies—of suffering constitute and enable action, whether action is understood as collective or individual. Put a different way, Arendt writes, "Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings."[145] Acting is at the same time suffering because the condition for all action—*viz.,* plurality—entails that we cannot undo, foretell, or prevent the consequences of what we put into motion,[146] because even our best intentions go awry, and because the only alternative to acting and suffering is never doing anything at all.[147]

The focus of this chapter has been to provide a reading of Hannah Arendt's action-theory: to examine the formulation of this theory in detail and to identify a set of problems related to how the enactment of action is explained (or not) by it. In chapter two, I expand on the suggestion that the intimacy of plurality entails an important role for emotion neglected in scholarship – that is, in both Arendt scholarship and in mainstream political philosophy. I will show how emotion matters for political action and provide my own sense of what emotions are and what they do by bringing together work in psychology (Tomkins, Damasio), contemporary affect studies (Ahmed, Brennan, Sullivan, Willett), political philosophy (Nussbaum, Hall, Krause, Anker), and feminist theory (Jaggar, Spelman,

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144 Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 183.
145 *Ibid.,* 190.
146 "…men never have been and never will be able to undo or even to control reliably any of the processes they start through action. Not even oblivion and confusion, which can cover up so efficiently the origin and the responsibility for every single deed, are able to undo a deed or prevent its consequences. And this incapacity to undo what has been done is matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed or even to have reliable knowledge of its motives." *Ibid.,* 232-233.
147 "The only salvation from this kind of freedom seems to lie in non-acting, in abstention from the whole realm of human affairs as the only means to safeguard one's sovereignty and integrity as a person." *Ibid.,* 234.

Lorde, Nash, and many of those already named). The tools I gather from these thinkers will help me to recuperate a theory of political action that takes seriously how being "in concert," as Arendt would say, is an unavoidably intercorporeal and affect-laden experience. Arendt's action-theory, as Arendt herself conceives it, is woefully lacking the resources and wherewithal to take these embodied dimensions seriously. As I argue, however, it is not *hopelessly* lacking. Indeed, as I will show in chapter four, there are significant resources in Arendt's work that are worth holding onto even as criticism of her broader project should continue and expand, especially in feminist philosophy and philosophy of race. Chapter two, "Affect and Embodied Action," contributes to these critical traditions by focusing on the neglected problem of emotion in Arendt's work. The aim of this critical intervention is not to delegitimize Arendt's account. The *upshot,* rather, is an Arendtian action-theory that is more responsive to and relevant for contemporary politics.

Chapter Two: Affect and Embodied Action

> Whatever the passions and the emotions may be, and whatever their true connection with thought and reason, they certainly are located in the human heart. And not only is the human heart a place of darkness which, with certainty, no human eye can penetrate; the qualities of the heart need darkness and protection against the light of the public to grow and to remain what they are meant to be, innermost motives which are not for public display. However deeply heartfelt a motive may be, once it is brought out and exposed for public inspection it becomes an object of suspicion rather than insight; when the light of the public falls upon it, it appears and even shines, but, unlike deeds and words which are meant to appear, whose very existence hinges on appearance, the motives behind such deeds and words are destroyed in their essence through appearance; when they appear they become "mere appearance" behind which again other, ulterior motives may lurk, such as hypocrisy and deceit...The heart, moreover...keeps its resources alive through a constant struggle that goes on in its darkness and because of its darkness...it is precisely the light of the world that distorts the life of the heart.
>
> -- Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*[148]

Introduction

Arendt's nonsovereign account of action invites a conversation about the "crisis of agency" in contemporary western theory, where this "crisis" is a product of 20th century challenges to the idea of self-mastery underlying traditional conceptions of "agency." Arendt's account disputes self-mastery by making "action" un-master-able—contingent, unpredictable, boundless. In reality however, she says very little about the "self" or agent, leading us to believe that while action is non-sovereign, the acting agent is still self-sufficient and autonomous.[149] So despite offering a productive rethinking of action as "action in concert," Arendt holds the conflicting view that motivation for action is a phenomenon endogenous to self-contained individuals; i.e., that the origins of motivation are internal to individual agents and that "agency" refers to an individual's capacity to act on their motivations.

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[148] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind,* 96-97.

[149] In fact, in a fuller account of this problem I would point out that Arendt's conception of the self appears to be in contradiction with her view that what we do constitutes who we are.

Further, she views those motivations themselves as inaccessible – both for individual actors and for theorists of action. For Arendt, what "appears" constitutes our worldly reality, and therefore, reality is only skin-deep. Literally.

I will undertake a deeper analysis of the significance of "appearance" in the work of both Arendt and Judith Butler in chapter four. The related point I wish to briefly argue here is that Arendt's account of self as surface (i.e., who we are is how we appear to others) not only juxtaposes surface and interiority, making normative claims about what may be seen in public and what should remain hidden, but the surface itself is not theorized as porous, meaning that the self *contains* what is inside and blocks what it is outside from getting in. This opacity and impermeability resists those who (like myself) may want to read Arendt's account of self and political subjectivity as relational all the way down. Her well-documented disdain for psychology, psychoanalysis, and other fields that presume to access this interior realm furthers the sense that she really viewed inner life as a kind of black box irrelevant to politics.

If the appearing surface hides an undifferentiated *stuff* contained inside, then included in this *stuff* is our motivations. According to Arendt, our ignorance about motivation for action is complete because, unlike the consequences of action, motivations never *appear.*[150] Motivations, on this view, remain hidden even from oneself, because they originate within one's self. We might speculate that "courage" becomes prominent in Arendt's reflections on action in part because displays of courage make manifest something that would otherwise remain completely obscure, e.g., the inner desire for glory, immortality, and distinction that Arendt believed spurs our entrance into the public realm. As I argued in chapter one, however, this description of courage still relies on an account of agency as a kind of heroic individualism that ignores the social contributions and context that make action specifically political.

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[150] Later, I will discuss in more detail Arendt's privileging of one form of sense perception—i.e., visual perception.

My contention is that what appears is not all that's there. Contrary to the picture Arendt presents, we *can* say something about how action happens that is more than skin-deep, and moreover, we can train ourselves to see more in what *does* appear than her account allows.

But this need not be a dead-end. What theories of affect and emotion offer for this project is a set of resources for understanding how to answer the question of motivation in a more satisfying way – What moves us to act? – where "us" refers to a plural, performative "we." This approach is more satisfying in part because it does not treat public political action as separate or necessarily distinct from the personal, corporeal, and intercorporeal dynamics of selfhood and agency understood as irreducibly social and relational. Instead, the theory I propose blurs the distinctions between endogenous and exogenous, inside and outside, active and passive, acting and being acted on. In order to demonstrate this broader argument, I will not only propose an alternative account of our affective relations, but I will compare it to Arendt's implicit theory of emotion, showing how the latter is the product of an outmoded way of thinking the relation of body and emotion. Resisting assumptions like Arendt's makes possible a more useful, and more accurate, account of political participation that does not see the presence of emotion in public as always and only a dangerous vehicle for thoughtlessness, conformism, and mass behavior.

My strategy in this chapter is to begin by arguing the broader point that emotion plays an important role in political action and that it isn't necessarily a negative one, before presenting a narrower claim about Arendt, emotion, and performative action. In the first place, this means contending with a long tradition in Western philosophy that disavows emotionality by separating body and mind, and consequently treating emotion as opposed and subordinate to reason. I challenge this tradition, in part by politicizing its history as one resting on structures of social hierarchy, and in part by presenting a critical counter-tradition for theorizing the relationship between reason and emotion

via the work of feminist philosophers, philosophers of emotion, and contemporary affect theorists, including psychologists. In the latter half of the chapter, I present Arendt's work as a case study: I show how her action-theory reflects, on the surface, a deep investment in a long tradition of somatophobia and antibiologism that characterizes much of the history of western philosophy and western culture.[151] I argue that Arendt fundamentally misunderstands what emotions are and what they do, and I examine what consequences this has for her theory of political action. However, I also outline an alternative way of understanding how emotion matters for action that relies on neglected resources in Arendt's own corpus.

This chapter has several primary aims that narrow in scope as we proceed: 1) First, I provide a general discussion intended to substantiate the basic claim that emotion matters for political action; 2) Next, I specify what I mean by "emotion" by surveying approaches in philosophy of emotion and contemporary affect studies; 3) I apply these insights to Hannah Arendt's work in order to draw out and critique the implicit affect theory shaping (or warping, as the case may be) her account of action; 4) Finally, I turn to the rich critical tradition of Arendt interpretation in feminist political philosophy to substantiate my claim that her work is characterized by caustic, far-reaching somatophobia and antibiologism which limits her action-theory in significant ways. By design, this chapter is meant to serve as a content-full survey of several traditions and a foundation for bringing the descriptions of performative action in Butler (chapter three) into conversation with the affective turn in contemporary theory (chapter four). Implicitly, I mean to suggest that both theoretical traditions offer resources for understanding the nature of political action that the other lacks. That is, I hope to show how embodied action is affective, and that affect sometimes performs a mode of embodied action.

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[151] Therefore, I believe most aspects of my critique are broadly applicable to political philosophy in the western tradition broadly construed, although I don't explicitly make all those connections here.

I. How emotion matters for political action

There has been an explosion in the past several years of new publications examining the politics of emotion in popular, philosophical, and social scientific literature.[152] With various aims, subjects, and methodologies, these works signal a shift: either politics is becoming more emotional, or the emotional dimensions of social life that always permeated the political sphere are becoming impossible to ignore. While it is possible that both these are true, I will focus on the latter, which finds considerable support in the work of political theorists (Nussbaum, Krause, Hall, Young, Anker, Fraser) and in the related arguments of feminist philosophers who focus on the epistemological and moral dimensions of emotion (Jaggar, Spelman, Frye, Ahmed). The works that I refer to in this section contribute to a burgeoning literature that contests how western philosophy's traditional mind/body dualism has kept emotion and politics opposed in *theory* even while emotion clearly plays an important role in political *practice.*

There are several ways of accounting for philosophers' typical reticence to take up emotion as a major theme. One of these is, I suspect, the assumption that emotions are fundamentally inchoate and mercurial, and therefore difficult to theorize. This is only ambiguously the case, however. As Lauren Berlant writes, there is "a haze of clarity and incoherence around emotions."[153] Alison Jaggar, in an early essay on emotion in feminist epistemology, traces how western philosophy has normatively shaped reason and emotion in terms of intelligibility. She notes that on the Platonic model, emotions are conceived as irrational urges controlled and directed by the use of reason – hence the image of the charioteer and horses in Plato's *Phaedrus.* According to Jaggar, this suggests that for the Greeks, "The split between reason and emotion was not absolute...Instead, the emotions were thought of as providing indispensable motive power that needed to be channeled appropriately. Without horses,

[152] See footnotes 13 and 14.
[153] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 159.

after all, the skill of the charioteer would be worthless."[154] With the scientific developments of the modern era and their emphasis on empirical testability and intersubjective verification however, reason and emotion were further opposed. Modern accounts that associate reason with clarity and control commonly reduce emotion to the "nonrational and often irrational urges that regularly swept the body, rather as a storm sweeps over the land."[155] Moreover, to put the issue in overtly Cartesian terms, emotions were not considered "clear and distinct" phenomena. Most thinkers seem to agree that emotions are or can be ambiguous—for instance, Berlant above—even if they would ultimately *dispute* the subsequent Cartesian conclusion that emotions should therefore be bracketed from philosophical inquiry.

An emphasis on the nonrational urgency of emotion not only brings to mind associations with animality as that which, by definition, cannot be reasoned with, but it casts the feeling body as a vessel that can only passively endure the blind force of emotion. Lost from the account of emotion that we get in the *Phaedrus* then, is a sense that emotion plays an active and necessary role in its relationship to reason. Instead, reason and emotion are not just distinct, but opposed, and emotion's particular power is considered wholly negative and passive. Following Jaggar, Sara Ahmed reminds us that emotions were commonly referred to as "the passions" during this time, noting that "passion" and "passive" share the same root in the Latin *passio,* or "suffering." She writes:

> The association between passion and passivity is instructive. It works as a reminder of how "emotion" has been viewed as "beneath" the faculties of thought and reason. To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body. Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as "closer" to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement.[156]

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[154] Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing,* ed. Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 145.
[155] *Ibid.*,146.
[156] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 3.

Given this gendered assignment of reason and emotion, it is easy to admit that Spinoza's "Man of Reason," for instance, really was a man and not merely a universal signifier.[157] And further, as the connection between emotion and passivity suggests, the privileged mode of action for the moderns was precisely that of the "dispassionate investigator," a myth that Jaggar points out only serves to bolster the epistemic authority of already dominant groups.[158]

This is important because part of what the moderns overlook is the extent to which emotions are social and intersubjective. Consonant with the autonomous individual subject in the philosophical works of modern thinkers like Descartes and Kant, is an account of emotion in modern moral psychology as a purely solipsistic--i.e., internal and autonomous--experience. Not to mention that the universal agent of moral psychology and philosophy alike always occupied a privileged social position.[159] Theories that emphasize the socially constituted nature of affect and emotion introduce another set of challenges that many "self"-centered philosophical methodologies do not, especially those that conceive of selfhood as individual and autonomous.[160] For social theories of subject formation (like Butler's theory, which I examine in the next chapter), the challenge that accounting for emotion poses is still acute, because they require a theoretical apparatus for explaining how it is that emotions are at once personally felt and socially shared. Sara Ahmed's circulation theory and Teresa Brennan's contagion theory are two attempts to describe how emotions move through social groupings in ways that still account for the intimacy of subjective emotional experience.[161] But even

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[157] Genevieve Lloyd, "The Man of Reason" in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*. First Edition, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 116.
[158] Jaggar, 158.
[159] Sandra Bartky, "Shame and Gender" in *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 97-98.
[160] "A holdover of the traditional view of the self, first-person authority grants introspection upon one's internal states as the sole source of knowledge of emotion, desire, belief, and so forth. Conversely, a social view of emotion supposes that emotions are constructed through one's social interactions. On this view, one cannot come to know one's emotions through introspection alone because one does not possess emotions as wholly internal phenomena." Sylvia Burrow, "The Political Structure of Emotion: From Dismissal to Dialogue," *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 28.
[161] See Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* and Theresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*.

these social theories often lack robust accounts of the physiological dimensions of emotion and/or fail to address how the social and the corporeal relate.[162]

A second way of understanding the reticence on the part of philosophical theories is to notice that they seem to display a simple lack awareness about the emotional dimensions of experience as a matter of disposition, whether at the level of individual awareness about one's own emotional state, or at the level of social, cultural, and political ideology. As scholars like Alison Jaggar remind us, the diminished status of emotion in philosophical inquiry reflects a wider ignorance about emotion in most segments of western culture. Because a great many of us have been encouraged to control or suppress emotion, Jaggar writes, "it's not unusual for people to be unaware of their emotional state or to deny it to themselves and others":

> This lack of awareness, especially combined with a neopositivist understanding of emotion that construes it just as a feeling of which one is aware, lends plausibility of the myth of dispassionate investigation. But lack of awareness of emotions certainly does not mean that emotions do not exert a continuing influence on people's articulated values and observations, thoughts and actions.[163]

In other words, cultural norms about emotionality sometimes cause us to be "out of touch" with our emotions and thereby diminish our ability to sense that experience includes emotion. Common in cases like these, is an unwarranted conclusion that because we are not aware of emotion's contributions, they're not really there. What *is* there, we might tacitly assume, is pure reason. As Berlant writes, "The seeming detachment of rationality…is not a detachment at all, but an emotional style associated normatively with a rhetorical practice."[164] The "myth of dispassionate investigation" so important for modern scientific and philosophical methodology, thus represents a separation of two functions—cognition and feeling—backed by a theory of emotion. Just because one has no conscious *awareness* of their emotional state does not mean that emotions aren't nevertheless important

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[162] This is Shannon Sullivan's major intervention in *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression.*
[163] Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," 155.
[164] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 27.

dimensions of "rational" activity. This idea, whether we call it "mood" (in the Heideggerian tradition), "calm passion"[165] (Hume), or "attunement" (in more recent parlance), contests the possibility of any "passionless pure beholding" and instead inscribes a dynamic and responsive affective ground as the "*a priori,* necessary feature of any possible human existence."[166] Debunking the myth of pure cognition is crucial because by challenging the idea that pure rationality is available, we can start to question the differential assignment of reason and emotionality to social groups and the strategic purposes behind them, especially when those strategies serve the maintenance of social hierarchies. Elizabeth Spelman, in conversation with Jaggar, deepens this point by bringing an intersectional analysis to considerations about which emotional states are permissible and for whom. In the essay "Anger and Insubordination," she notes that,

> [We] find most everywhere...in the history of western philosophy in general, considerable anxiety about the emotions: for the emotions typically are seen as interfering with the smooth and successful functioning of reason, and hence as lessening the prospects of good philosophy (that requires that reason be in control) and good government (which requires that people with a high degree of rationality be in command).[167]

Exploring this connection between fitness for rule and self-rule—where self-rule refers to the reasoning mind's ability to control and direct the emotions—Spelman argues that it is no accident that women and people of color are culturally associated with excessive emotionality, and therefore weakness, vulnerability, instability, and ultimately, irrationality. The differential assignment of emotions to these groups, she points out, benefits members of socially dominant groups by casting subordinate others as unfit to occupy positions of power and leadership, and by creating cultural

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[165] Hume's moral sentiment theory contests the idea that reason can transcend sentiment. Instead, he "treated moral judgment as a reflective passion, where thought and feeling are integrated at the deepest level." Moreover, Sharon Krause writes that when our judgments are "experienced in a calm fashion," they can be easily mistaken simply for "reason," "but on reflection we can see that they differ from purely cognitive states in being a form of reflective caring, not merely a type of understanding. (Sharon Krause, *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 10-12)

[166] Sandra Bartky, "Shame and Gender," 83.

[167] Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination" in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*. First Edition, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 263.

expectations that these others will instead perform the emotional labor that sustains the (white) "man of action" and "man of thought" in his elevated, rational activities.[168] But, she argues, "there is a striking exception to this assignment":

> [W]hile members of subordinate groups are expected to be emotional, indeed to have their emotions run their lives, their anger will not be tolerated: the possibility of their being angry will be excluded by the dominant group's profile of them...Why has anger been appropriated by and for dominant groups or beings when in so many other ways emotions are thought to be the province of subordinate groups?[169]

Spelman's answer to this question, which I will explore in some more detail in subsequent sections, is that the anger of members of subordinate groups functions as *insubordination*, i.e., as politically subversive. Not only is anger contestatory in a general sense, it is specifically a way of identifying and responding to injustice, and it presupposes that the angry person takes themselves seriously as someone who will not passively accept their subordinate status.[170] Consequently, when dominant groups delineate who can feel what, especially who can feel angry, "they are attempting to exclude those subordinate to them from the category of moral agents," i.e., as those capable of making moral judgments about negative treatment on their own behalf. "Hence," she writes, "there is a politics of emotion: the systematic denial of anger can be seen as a mechanism of subordination, and the existence and expression of anger as an act of insubordination."[171] For some philosophers, like Martha Nussbaum, emotions even involve truth-value: When anger is expressed as a response to some moral violation, "it makes a truth-claim about its own evaluations"—i.e., that I am right to be angry in this

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[168] Shatema Threadcraft's work in *Intimate Justice* shows that this is also the case vis a vis nonwhite and white women, so that white women (think: second-wave) achieved their freedom from the activities of domestic sphere only by passing this labor off onto women of color. This distribution, Threadcraft makes clear, is an issue of structural inequality and injustice, which she calls "intimate injustice." (Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016)

[169] Spelman, 264.

[170] Spelman, 267.

[171] Spelman, 270. Sylvia Burrow, in her article "The Political Structure of Emotion: From Dismissal to Dialogue," notes that the dismissal of anger is particularly troubling because anger serves as an important source of motivation and insight, and because it is a "politically and epistemically subversive response to oppressive practice." For her, the dismissal of legitimate anger is considered a form of emotional abuse. Like Spelman, she argues that, "the political strategy of dismissal restrictively controls others through controlling their emotions. The control of another's expression of emotion undermines that person's confidence and may reduce or remove the possibility for engaging in actions significant to her life." (Burrow, 27-28)

situation. Indeed, Berlant insists that neither action nor affect merely express an internal state, they "measure a situation."[172] What is often at issue when the right to express anger is denied, then, is a struggle over whether what I identify (judge and evaluate) as a violation worth being angry about is in fact a violation worth being angry about and thus my worth as a moral and epistemic agent capable of making these judgments.[173] This is one reason why gaslighting—attempting to convince someone that they wrongly perceive reality (e.g., that anger is misplaced because a violation isn't *really* worthy of anger or didn't *really* happen)—is a common tactic for holding onto power (by policing emotions).

It should be noted too that "the systematic denial of anger" is rarely a "cold" practice of unawareness, ignorance, or dismissal, but usually involves the work of other emotions as well. Fear is one instance, since for subordinate groups to express anger is often perceived by dominant groups as a threat of aggression that is, by their definition, irrational: examples of antiblack racism include stereotypes like "the angry black woman" that link anger with irrational aggression and violence, threatening their status as reliable epistemic agents (which becomes particularly important in confrontations with police, for instance) and even safety (since black embodiment is read as threatening regardless of any particular action).[174] Dominant groups have an interest in denying the rights of subordinate groups to feel anger (as well as "positive" emotions like pride), just as they have an interest in emphasizing the capacities and comportments of subordinated groups to be generally

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[172] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 198.

[173] Krause, *Civil Passions,* 57.

[174] Melvin Rogers, in an essay written shortly after the murder of Philando Castile, powerfully describes how black people automatically suppress reasonable emotions like anger and fear in confrontations with law enforcement. "In doing so [requiring composure], we commit another form of violence, the reverberations of which most assuredly affects the mental health of black folks, reminding us, yet again, that what is expected of Black Americans is not expected of whites. It is demanded that we hold in and contain what should rightly be released: screams and tears. In short, pain. The American public demands this because the presumption of a dishonest black person, already in circulation in our culture, is intensified by the sight of an emotional black person." The differential assignment of emotionality and "composure" along race and gender lines does not describe what we witness in footage of Philando Castile's murder, nor any association of that "composure" with the person representing the law, officer Jeronimo Yanez. Instead, we witness a seemingly calm and unemotional Diamond Reynolds and a highly agitated, emotional Yanez. Melvin Rogers, "On Diamond Reynolds after Dallas," Public Seminar, July 8, 2016, <www.publicseminar.org/2016/07/on-diamond-reynolds-after-dallas/#.WUq-g-tXerU>.

feeling-full. Meanwhile, dominant groups also have positive affective attachments to prevailing norms (social, cultural, affective, etc.) that promise to reproduce their dominant status.[175]

While many philosophers agree that emotions involve bodily sensations, this is typically only taken as a further reason to disregard the moral, epistemic, and political significance of emotions. In other words, many philosophers dismiss the epistemic value and reliability of the "felt" aspect of emotion precisely because felt implies embodied. Genevieve Lloyd argues that the mind/matter opposition underwriting the Cartesian method subsumes the reason/emotion opposition on the basis of emotion's felt, and therefore bodily and material, aspect. She notes that,

> In the seventeenth century the passions were characteristically seen as a source of disorder and falsehood. Thought was the essence of the mind; the passions were seen as intruding distractions and disturbances resulting from the mind's union with the body. Although necessarily disproved of, they were seen as, at worst, threats to purity and clarity of thought; and, at best as confused modes of thought itself. They were to be either transcended and kept in subjugation by reason or else transformed by reason into higher modes of thought.[176]

Descartes's quest for "clear and distinct ideas" thus required "shedding the sensuous from thought."[177] For many feminist epistemologists and phenomenologists—like Jaggar, Spelman, Ahmed, and Steinbock discuss—the fact that emotions involve sense experience and therefore affirm how thinking beings are sensate, embodied creatures does not take away from our ability to reason *or* the reliability of emotion's knowledge. Many of these thinkers dispute any such opposition between reason and emotion (or mind and body, for that matter), pointing out how reason always involves emotion, and vice versa. Steinbock argues that emotions reveal aspects of our world and our-selves to us in ways that reason cannot, and further, that emotions have their own "distinctive evidential footing" for determining what constitutes knowledge and reality. That footing, though Steinbock refers to "the evidence of the heart," is likely located elsewhere. Alison Jaggar suggests that one reason why paying

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[175] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 53.
[176] Lloyd, 125.
[177] Lloyd, 116.

attention to emotional experience, and taking these experiences seriously as evidence, is that they may point to aspects of our reality that haven't (yet) risen to the level of consciousness. She writes:

> Conventionally unexpected or inappropriate emotions may precede our conscious recognition that accepted descriptions and justifications often conceal as much as reveal the prevailing state of affairs. Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger, or fear may we bring to consciousness our "gut-level" awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger.[178]

"The stomach has reasons that reason does not know."[179] Common experiences of "gut-level" awareness points many feminist thinkers, including myself, toward an examination of non-cerebral or non-conscious workings of affect that are located (physiologically) elsewhere than in the mind. "Gut Brain" or "second brain" models affirm the importance of embodied knowledge that often goes by other names, for instance "gut feeling" or "intuition." These theories flesh out our understanding of the gut's insights and in the process, help ground their epistemic authority in many cases, despite the fact that gut-level insights may lack the kind of clarity and articulateness of other epistemic forms associated with the "first brain."[180] Affirming the contributions of the "gut brain" can mean affirming the experience and resistance of subordinated peoples to forms of epistemic injustice, especially when that injustice consists in denying the epistemic authority or existence of emotions as such. If emotions are "allowed" within the dominant order, it is because they do not interfere with the position of dominant social groups or the epistemic systems that bolster that position. On the other hand, "outlaw emotions" are so-called precisely because they contest the smooth functioning of that system. On this model, a gut-level feeling is the experience of an "outlaw emotion": it is the feeling of coming up against "the hegemony that our society exercises over people's emotional constitution" and finding

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[178] Jaggar, 161.
[179] Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.*
[180] For more on the "gut brain" and its contributions to ethics, affect studies, epistemology, and politics, see: Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015)*;* Shannon Sullivan, *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015)*;* Cynthia and Julie Willett, *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press in 2019).

out that it is not total.[181] If the feeling of that dissonance is puzzling at first, it is because outlaw emotions not only contest our emotional constitution, but the very idea that emotion could function as a mode of knowledge that reveals a different perspective or submerged reality. Therefore, when dominant groups denigrate or exclude emotion from the sphere of what counts as reliable knowledge, they do a few things: they ensure that the dominant society perpetuates itself in accordance with the methods of knowledge production constituted in the exclusion of emotion; they exclude the contributions of women and people of color *as* emotional and thereby diminish their status as epistemic agents according to the definition of "knower" as "dispassionate investigator"; continually obscure the reality of subordinated people by discrediting non-normative modes of apprehending and sharing their reality.[182]

Despite or because of the valuable information we are constantly receiving from the gut, our strategies of emotional unawareness and denial seem particularly sophisticated, intractable, and strategic today. After all, images depicting the fact of heightened and differential precarity across the globe are ubiquitous, and all those appeals call for an emotional response that we often feel too "burnt out" to feel. And yet, the feeling of emotional burnout also represents and provokes certain affective responses.[183] Following work on epistemologies of ignorance, my suggestion would be that those affects of burnout and other forms of psycho-social resistance may also function as modes of ignorance that contribute to much of the confusion or denial about emotional experience. It is certainly true that our emotional experiences often make for slippery objects of inquiry, and the

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[181] Jaggar, 159.

[182] Jaggar, 261.

[183] If we follow Lauren Berlant's suggestion that we view agency, "not only in inflated terms but also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness," then we can see how "the scene of slow death," understood as the "condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life," points to a relevant account of political and ethical agency as "an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; and embodying, alongside embodiment." "Impassivity and other politically depressed relations of alienation, coolness, detachment, or distraction, especially in subordinated populations, can be read as affective forms of engagement with the environment of slow death, much as the violence of battered women has had to be reunderstood as a kind of destruction toward survival." (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* pp. 99 and 117)

nonnormative who experience gaslighting and other forms of epistemic injustice encounter these challenges differently. A "political phenomenology of the emotions" that takes these differences of social location into account will reveal how particular emotions become central to the experiences of marginalized persons so that some are encouraged and amplified—e.g., shame—and others discouraged and repressed—e.g., anger.[184] Meanwhile, "social location" should be understood as an account of space as well: shame, for instance, can be my sense of diminished status in the context of some social hierarchy, and it can be the physical space that widens between myself and others as I turn in and away in distress.[185] Both these dynamics—the psycho-social and the spatial—are ways that emotions manifest in worldly, interpersonal relationships, and studying them contributes to a "phenomenology of oppression."[186]

Another way to understand the subordinate status of emotion in the history of western philosophy has to do, then, with an unwillingness to take seriously the moral, political, and epistemic claims that emotions reveal. In other words, those in privileged positions might display in their philosophical positions a reticence to acknowledge how emotions are revelatory of our social and political relationships, especially when what they reveal is the de facto existence of inequality and injustice in political spaces ostensibly characterized by de jure equality and justice. David Haekwon Kim puts the point succinctly when he reminds us that feelings are almost never *merely* feelings.[187] While untangling the meanings behind our emotional experiences can be puzzling for many of the reasons sketched above, doing this work is possible and important. If our emotions reveal who and what we care about, as many of the thinkers I discuss suggest, then they also reveal who and what are

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[184] For women and nonwhites, anger is threatening to the dominant social order (Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination") and meanwhile shame is made a "pervasive affective attunement to the social environment" (Bartky, 85; see also David Haekwon Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation").
[185] For instance, see Sara Ahmed's account of shame in *Cultural Politics of Emotion.*
[186] Bartky, 84.
[187] David Haekwon Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation," *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race* ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 114.

considered care-worthy. This is because on my account, both emotion and selfhood are social phenomena; i.e. socially constituted. Whether one follows Jaggar in her attempt to carve out a space for emotion in epistemology via cognitive modes of evaluation not subsumed under "rationality," or whether one follows Anthony Steinbock's desire to recover emotions' particular structure, cognitive style, and "distinctive evidential footing" somewhere between mind and matter,[188] the common aim of these authors is to argue for the meaningfulness of emotions for revealing the interpersonal dimensions of personal experience, specifically the moral dimensions of our relationships. Emotions are revelatory of persons as interpersonal, and this means that emotions not only play a role in epistemological and moral theories (where philosophy has, for the most part, situated the relevance of emotion), but in political theories as well.[189]

Contemporary political philosophers identify two primary ways that emotion matters for political action: judgement and motivation. And yet, as Sharon Krause's 2008 book *Civil Passions* argues, the field defining works of 20th century political philosophy overwhelmingly belong to rationalist traditions that deliberately bracket affect from their accounts of justice. Krause focuses on two major figures, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, arguing that although these thinkers develop compelling normative theories of democracy, "the rationalist models of deliberation and norm justification" they employ suffer from a "motivational deficit":

> The ideal of reason as a faculty that abstracts from sentiment, which undergirds impartiality on this view, disconnects the deliberating subject from the motivational sources of human agency, which are found in the affective attachments and desires from which subjects are asked to abstract. The self as deliberator comes apart from

[188] Anthony Steinbock, *Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart* (Evanston: University Press, 2014), 4-5.
[189] With the personal as interpersonal I'm recalling Tony Steinbock's account of "moral emotions": "By moral emotions, I mean those emotions that are essentially interpersonal or that arise essentially in an interpersonal nexus. Rather than understanding the moral sphere as pertaining to an individualistic concept of the human being relevant only to the interior makeup of the subject, I understand the moral sphere as expressing human existence as interpersonal co-existence and in this way informing the sphere of 'praxis'...The use of 'moral' in 'moral emotions' is mean to evoke the irreducible interpersonal dimension of experience...[M]oral experience is irreducibly moral, but it is also the experience implicitly of not being self-grounding." Anthony Steinbock, *Moral Emotions: Reclaiming the Evidence of the Heart,* 12-14.

> the self as agent...[Both] views aspire to limit the contributions of affect to the realm of application, while norm justification itself is conceived as a function of a form of reason that transcends affective influences.[190]

Rationalist thinkers like Rawls and Habermas believe that we ought to abstract from affective influences in order to preserve (a) the impartiality and (b) the normative content of democratic decision making—whether that takes the form of some deliberative procedure (as in Habermas) or the original position (Rawls). Their moral standpoints thus "betray a familiar fear about affect, which is that our passions will impugn the impartiality on which deliberation in matters of justice ought to rest."[191]

Krause agrees with Rawls and Habermas that impartiality is essential for justice but disagrees with the assumption that affect, or sentiment, is necessarily antithetical to impartiality.[192] She proceeds by undercutting this assumption: the relevant conflict, she argues, is not between theories of judgment and deliberation that incorporate sentiment and those that bracket it; instead, we should contest the artificial separation between reason and sentiment that raises this issue as a conflict in the first place by showing that practical reason is necessarily affective at every level. Sentiment not only spurs deliberation (motivation), but also constitutes it (judgment).[193] Drawing on Hume's theory of moral sentiment, Krause uses the term "concern" to describe affective states integral to deliberation and that involve the kind of reflective valuing and caring that are necessary for disposing us to decision and action. The "affective experience of caring," she explains, is what enables us to go beyond "mere understanding" since understanding that I ought to do something does not mean that I'll actually do

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190 Sharon Krause, *Civil Passions,* 2.
191 Krause, 3.
192 Krause briefly survey's work in feminist care ethics and affect theory that do consider affect indispensable for judgment and motivation, however she says that "theorists of affect sometimes defend affective judgment as an alternative to impartiality." "To reject impartiality," she argues, "is to saddle affective forms of judgment with a normative deficit." In other words, affect theories that are suspicious of impartiality have trouble establishing reasonable limits to judgment and action in settings where emotions might go awry and constitute legitimate dangers, for instance to the democratic minority. (Krause, 5-6)
193 Krause, 118.

it.[194] Krause's major descriptive claim, then, is that affect (or passion or sentiment – she uses these terms interchangeably) and practical reason are inseparable. And, for her, the way(s) they are inseparable is important: our emotions don't just "jumpstart" deliberation and then recede into the background while reason takes over the real work of deciding what to do; while emotions, for Krause, provide motivational support for the kind of practical reasoning that takes place in deliberation, they are also a crucial part of moral and practical reasoning itself.[195] Against the dominant view that "regards politics as being in need of protection (via reason) from the passions of citizens," Krause argues that emotional engagement actually refines and strengthens moral judgment by alerting us to injustice (e.g., via anger), to our responsibilities to others (e.g., via emotions like compassion or shame), to the relative value of different options before us, etc.[196]

Because moral sentiments are always already involved in judgment, and because, in any case, they actually increase the sensitivity of our capacities for moral judgment, Krause argues for the inclusion of "a greater diversity of expressive forms" in our accounts of deliberation, specifically those that would not pass muster with Rawls or Habermas. With other feminist thinkers like Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, and Jane Mansbridge,[197] she argues that the inclusion of these expressive forms, rooted in the moral sentiments, enhances our deliberative capacities, and that these enhanced

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[194] Krause, 50. This claim is supported by Antonio Damasio's work in the popular book *Descartes' Error:* Damasio, a psychologist, discovers that patients who experience brain damage in specific regions are able to maintain all the cognitive facility to accomplish moral reasoning in abstract cases, but when it comes to making decisions about how to act in the "real world," they are not only incapable of doing the right thing (motivation), but of landing on any determinate course of action whatsoever (deliberation and decision making). In short, Damasio's research supports Krause's claim that the emotions (processed in that region of the brain) are necessary and constitutive of practical reasoning. (Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 51)

[195] Krause seems to important this claim from relevant considerations developed in feminist care ethics, for instance in Virginia Held's *Ethics of Care,* which views emotion as an essential rather than incidental or poisonous for the practice of making moral judgments. (Krause, 58)

[196] Krause, 55.

[197] See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text,* no. 25/26 (1990): pp. 56-80; Iris Marion Young, "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Theory* 29, no. 5 (2001): pp. 670-690.

capacities stand the best chance of creating lasting change in our political institutions since, as she puts it, "our minds are changed when our hearts are engaged."[198]

Martha Nussbaum agrees that emotions are central to political transformation and stability. She also underlines the role of emotion for creating the kind of attachments to objects, including principles of justice, that motivate action, and therefore incorporates both particularistic and principle-dependent aspects.[199] But when it comes to the role of emotion in judgment, Nussbaum rightly receives some push-back, since her theory of emotion drastically minimizes the affective, or felt, component of emotions. For Nussbaum, as I will discuss in more detail later, emotions are not just impulses, but involve a cognitive component – it is this mix of the affective and the cognitive that explains how it is the case, for instance, that I can simultaneously hold the abstract belief that all people matter equally and yet sustain strong affective attachments to *particular* individuals who are close to me.[200] Especially in her later work however, this cognitivism "runs so deep that it sometimes seems to minimize the influence of affect nearly to the point of extinguishing it altogether." This has the effect of reducing emotions to their cognitive content, for instance beliefs or judgments, and consequently, "the whole concept of 'affect' turns out to be superfluous to emotion." As many philosophers, including Krause, rightly point out, this account of emotion stripped of its affective dimensions departs too far from how we actually experience emotions – that is, as *felt* and embodied, if perhaps also subtle, "calm," and/or ambiguous.[201]

Of course, emotions also matter for action because they are just as often *not* subtle. Indeed, the "dangers" that strong emotions pose for the political realm have been frequently remarked upon, as we'll see later with Arendt. It is in part as a response to these real dangers that rationalism became

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198 Krause, 125; 139.
199 Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013), 10.
200 Nussbaum, 11.
201 Krause, 60-61.

so popular in political philosophy and political science, casting politics as being "in need of protection (via reason) from the passions of citizens."[202] However, Krause and Nussbaum have distinct strategies for addressing these dangers without bracketing emotion. For Nussbaum, the solution is to encourage the flourishing of "positive emotions" that are constitutive of, but also responsive to, democratic modes of self-criticality and revision.[203] This means that societies should actively cultivate an emotional climate of sympathy and love that "supports and sustains good laws and institutions."[204] She excludes from the political domain so-called "negative emotions," for instance shame and disgust, the likes of which she believes only fosters cultures of discrimination that are antithetical to political stability and equality.[205] For Sharon Krause, "negative emotions" are not to be excluded, but instead kept within "civil" bounds by "impartiality" in deliberation and decision-making. After affirming once again that "[we] cannot reach decisions about what to do in the absence of affective attachments and desires," Krause also acknowledges that our feelings and desires are not always free of prejudice or error:

> Cruelty, bigotry, and destructive rage are very dangerous indeed. To counter them, however, we cannot turn to a form of reason that simply transcends affective modes of consciousness—because no such faculty is available to us, at least when it comes to practical deliberation and decision making. Instead of transcending affect, we need to civilize it. We need to identify principled criteria and public practices that can make affect serve impartiality to the greatest extent possible.[206]

For Nussbaum too, we need laws and institutions that prevent political emotions from going off the deep end, and further, the cart will sometimes need to be put before the horse: sometimes, it is our

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[202] Krause, 22; 55.
[203] "[All] of the core emotions that sustain a decent society have their roots in, or are forms of, love—by which I mean intense attachments to things outside the control of our will." (p. 15) "[The] public cultivation of emotion needs to be scrutinized by a vigorously critical public culture, strongly committed to the protection of dissenting speech." Nussbaum, *Political Emotions,* 19.
[204] Nussbaum, 316.
[205] Nussbaum, 379. And see Krause, 140.
[206] Krause, 22.

emotional attachments that spur the creation of new laws and institutions, but sometimes the law itself needs to change before the hearts of citizens can follow.[207]

Feminist and affect theorists offer resources, including empirical resources, that support the claim that emotion matters for action. Working within political philosophy, Krause and Nussbaum posit at least two of the ways that emotion matters—motivation ("jumpstarting" action) and judgment (deciding what to do)—but there are other important points to be made that involve power and "feeling" and that only become intelligible once we turn to the embodied dimensions of relationality.

II. Approaches in philosophy of emotion and contemporary affect studies

In this section, I turn to thinkers in contemporary affect studies in order to outline an alternative account of what emotions are and what they do that goes beyond the oppositions I sketched above between subject/object, inside/outside, cause/effect, reason/emotion, mind/body, active/passive, etc. The accounts of affect and emotion that I discuss suggest a different model of inquiry against, between, and/or beyond these delineations.[208] For some, as we'll see, this means that affect theory resists generalizability and cohesion, and instead exists in instances and iterations. What contemporary theories of emotion all suggest, regardless of internal debates and disagreements, is that Arendt fundamentally misunderstands the nature of emotion. On this basis, as I later argue, the exclusion of emotion from the purview of political action is unwarranted. Once emotion is taken seriously as a dimension of action worth studying, Arendt's theory actually provides a compelling framework for specifying how emotion underwrites a relational account of power and agency. Internal to that action-theory, I also believe that an affect-theoretical lens helps answer the very question that Arendt herself

[207] Nussbaum, 316. My own view is that for this, too much hangs on the existence of a benevolent and charismatic leader or "legislator" (a la Rousseau), and is therefore an oddly undemocratic argument for Nussbaum to put forth.
[208] Gregg and Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader, The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 4.

raises when she refers to action as a "miracle" – the ongoing discussion about motivation for action will be taken up explicitly in the chapter's final section.

While contemporary theorists who study emotion tend to contest the notion that emotion is or should be subordinated to reason, they also disagree with a stronger positivist view which says that emotions are identical to bodily sensations or on par with involuntary bodily movements. For positivists, emotions are just as rational as "feelings of dizziness or spasms of pain" – in other words, completely *irrational.* Elizabeth Spelman refers to this as the "Dumb View"[209] of emotion, so-called because "early positivist accounts of emotion considered emotions to be 'dumb' in that they supposedly...[had] nothing meaningful to say, and this made it somewhat 'dumb,' or stupid, for philosophers or anyone else to pay them much attention."[210] Feminist philosophers like Spelman resist this account, arguing that emotion is not only *not* a "dumb" thing to study, but that emotions do in fact constitute meaningful and reliable appraisals of objective reality.

Not too far from the kind of view that Spelman seems to have in mind is the account of emotion that William James develops in *The Principles of Psychology.* There, James argues that "*our feeling of the same* [bodily] *changes as they occur* IS *the emotion,"* and later, "the emotion here [in the case of 'morbid fear'] is nothing but the feeling of a bodily state, and it has a purely bodily cause."[211] Shannon Sullivan argues that after bracketing the misleading language of cause and effect that has led other interpreters astray,[212] William James's account of emotion is one that, at its heart, "challenges hierarchies of mind over body that plague many accounts of emotion and, indeed, the field of philosophy as a whole." And indeed, far from dismissing emotion as "dumb," Sullivan argues that, "James's insistence on the

[209] Elizabeth Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination," 265.
[210] Sullivan, *Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 30.
[211] James, *The Principles of Psychology,* 449 and 459, quoted in Sullivan, *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression,* 36.
[212] *Sullivan*, 35.

bodily natu re of emotions does not debase or trivialize them because [for him] the body is neither base nor trivial...Fully physiological, emotions are not at all dumb. They can be very smart."[213] Sullivan's full account emphasizes how cultural context and socialization are involved in this physiological theory of emotion, which I will turn to later.

For now, I want to contrast James's view (as Sullivan presents it) with the "cognitivist theories" of emotion that feminist critics of positivism take up instead. Sullivan quotes James at length from *The Principles of Psychology:*

> *If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind,* no "mind-stuff" out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains.[214]

James's view that there is no "mind-stuff" apart from the bodily feelings that constitutes emotion is in stark contrast with the view held by many who reason that if there were no cognitive content to emotion, we would be unable to account for a few very common features of typical emotional experiences. For one, we would be unable to distinguish between different emotions that involve the same or similar physical symptoms. For example, when we experience tears and a red, hot face, how are we to know that this is anger and not some other emotion like sadness or frustration? Second, how can we account for chronic or long-term emotions that unfold over a period of time; for example, when "someone continues to be shocked or saddened by a situation, even if she is at the moment laughing heartily"?[215]

Responding to these questions—and convinced of positivism's inability to answer them—many feminist philosophers endorse "cognitive theories" of emotion instead. Rather than identifying emotions with bodily states as James does, "cognitivist" theories posit two components of emotion:

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[213] Sullivan, 35.
[214] Sullivan, 34. Emphasis in original.
[215] Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination," 265-266 and Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," 161.

an affective (or feeling) component and a cognitive component that "identifies what the feeling is."[216] For cognitivist theorists of emotion, as Alison Jaggar explains,[217] the cognitive component accounts for the intentionality of emotion and involves judgment.[218] These two dimensions of emotion—intentionality and judgment—can, according to cognitivists, provide more information about the emotions we experience beyond the mere "feelings" that accompany them. Elizabeth Spelman makes this particularly clear:

> Though cognitivists differ among each other on certain details, they share the conviction that emotions cannot simply be feelings, like churnings in our stomachs, flutterings of our hearts, chokings in our throats. Though such feelings may accompany my regretting having hurt you or my sense of shame in having hurt you, the difference between my regret and my shame cannot be accounted for by reference to such feelings; nor can the difference between my regret in having hurt *you* or my regret in having hurt *my father*. There is a kind of logic to our emotions that has nothing to do with whatever dumb feelings may accompany them.[219]

What Spelman is getting at with this description is that according to "cognitive theories," emotions are not merely "dumb" feelings, but they have a "kind of logic"—i.e., a cognitive component—that makes it possible to discriminate between different emotions *and* between the objects of those emotions. To put it another way, cognitivists like Spelman have pointed out that "a phrase such as 'irrational fear' is not a mere redundancy, nor is 'rational fear' a contradiction in terms."[220] If fear

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216 Sullivan, 33.

217 Alison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* ed. Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press (1989): 149.

218 However, while there is an abundance of important work in Arendt scholarship linking affect and the aesthetic theory of *judgment*, there is very little that explores the possible connections between affect and action even though, as I have tried to suggest, there is a similarly sensate dimension involved in the embodiment of action. In my view, this is primarily because Arendt herself dismisses the role of both emotion and the body at every turn. Judgment, unlike Action, is still a mental activity, and therefore the influence of sensation implied by the aesthetic mode remains abstract and highly subjective. Some philosophers of emotion express similar concerns about the "cognitivist" theories of emotion, that although they incorporate affect, this component is still downplayed, and the role of judgment or belief made prominent.

219 Spelman, "The Feeling of Virtue and the Virtue of Feeling" in *Feminist Ethics,* ed. Claudia Card. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, (1991): 221.

220 Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination," 265-266. Spelman points out that emotions are revelatory of the object and the subject. Referring to women's anger in particular, Spelman makes the important point that this anger often amounts to insubordination: "To be angry at him is to make myself, at least on this occasion, his judge—to have, and to express, a standard against which I assess his conduct. If he is in other ways regarded as my superior, when I get angry at him I at least on that occasion am regarding him as no more and no less than my equal. So my anger is in such a case an act of insubordination: I am acting as if I have as much right to judge him as he assumes he has to judge me. So I not only am

responds to the presence of danger, then when I am afraid, I am implicitly *judging* that fear is the appropriate response. On the other hand, an "irrational" fear would be when I respond in fear to a nonexistent danger. At the far end of the cognitivist spectrum are philosophers like Martha Nussbaum, for whom "feeling" is emotion's contingent component, at least in some cases. For Nussbaum, emotions have propositional content (e.g., belief) and evaluative content (e.g., judgment), but they need not have feeling content. In other words, emotions need not involve any feelings at all: "Emotions consist of two *thoughts* and nothing more: 'thought of an object combined with thought of the object's salience or importance.'"[221] For cognitivists, then, there *is* "mind-stuff" apart from bodily-stuff, and even mind-stuff *without* bodily-stuff.

Although cognitivism about emotions posits an affective *and* a cognitive component, it is often the cognitive component, usually conceived in terms of belief, judgment, or evaluation, that is emphasized. Cognitivists seem to imply by this that, after all, the affective component is just the murky "bodily-stuff" and it's the cognitive component that allows us to make the important distinctions between different emotions, between objects, and between the truth-values of different emotion-object combinations. On Spelman's account, for instance, the fact that emotions involve judgments means that they help reveal the *moral* dimensions of our relationships with others; i.e., they reveal who and what we care about.[222] Spelman is explicitly in conversation with Aristotle when she suggests that a cognitivist theory of emotion can also help explain how we could say that someone has the *right* to feel a certain way, and even that they *ought* to feel a certain way—for instance, one *ought* to be angry in response to the unjust actions of another. For Spelman then, the ability to distinguish between related emotions is *morally* significant: not only would failing to feel the appropriate emotion in a given

taking his actions seriously but by doing so I am taking myself seriously, as a judge of the goodness or badness of his actions."

[221] Krause, 61.

[222] Spelman, 22. See also Steinbock and Ahmed on the moral and evaluative dimensions of emotion.

circumstance be unjust, but when it comes to self-evaluative emotions like shame, it would mean that we have failed to judge *ourselves* appropriately.[223] In some cases, as I will explore later on, that failure may actually become an injustice and thus an opportunity to deepen one's sense of shame.

For now, I would like to first make a case against certain versions of cognitivism that discount emotion's affective component. Although the cognitivist view that judgments constitute emotions clarifies, and even validates, how emotions can accurately describe and appraise real conditions—validates, for instance, the anger of subordinated groups by defining anger as a rational judgment about objective conditions (not merely a directionless, irrational urge or bodily sensation without broader moral significance)—putting too much emphasis on the cognitive component has the effect of once again diminishing the significance of the affective dimensions of experience. As Sullivan puts it: "On a cognitivist account, bodily feelings are still dumb, and a non-bodily intellect has all the smarts."[224] Indeed, by identifying "emotion" with this cognitive aspect of intention and judgment, cognitivist theories seem to problematically replicate the hierarchy between emotion and reason and "reinforce the traditional western preference for mind over body" that many of these theorists, feminists especially, originally contested.[225] Moreover, even if this split between the thinking and feeling components were made defensible to its critics, cognitivist theories don't seem to explain the relationship between emotion's dual components.[226]

Indeed, theorists who lament how affect is deemphasized in cognitivist accounts point to emotional experiences that appear to occur apart from, prior to, or even against our considered judgments. Putting aside for a moment the wider critique that cognitivist theories can't provide a robust account of physiology,[227] the following considerations argue contra-cognitivism that there is a

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[223] For Nussbaum too, Aristotle's influence looms large.
[224] Sullivan, 33.
[225] Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," 150.
[226] Sullivan, 33.
[227] Sullivan, 32-34.

class of emotional experiences that remain unintelligible if mind-stuff is prioritized and bodily-stuff is marginalized. Both Sandra Bartky and David Haekwon Kim, for instance, point out that we often undergo emotions *against* our judgment. Philosophers who argue that beliefs or judgments are constitutive of emotions don't recognize how a social structure, and one's place in it, can induce emotional experiences unconnected to relevant beliefs or judgments about reality. Bartky, who focuses on shame, gives the example of her women students who "felt inadequate without really believing themselves to be inadequate in the salient respects: They sensed something inferior about themselves without believing themselves to be generally inferior at all." In this case, she suggests that "feelings" of inferiority constitute a shame experience apart from and in contradiction to the cognitive belief that one is *not* inferior.[228] Both Bartky and Kim adopt a theory of emotion that is more thoroughly *social,* attending to the signals and messages that operate below the "level of explicit awareness," accumulated to form certain "feelings" or "sensings" that "do not reach a state of clarity we can dignify as belief."[229] Put more strongly, cognitive theories of emotion that rest on belief or judgment do not do justice to the experiences of subjects who come into a world that is already socially ordered. Emotions, for instance shame, are an integral aspect of this organization, and thus, for socially subordinated people, emotions are experienced as "the *inward resonance of a suppressive social order."*[230] That is, emotions are often experienced for reasons having nothing to do with a person's self-assessment or other cognitive process, and often surprise us in their intensity. This is why, for Kim, "feelings are almost never 'merely' feelings," but manifestations of a political organization that reveals where we stand in relation to shared social meanings, that orders who or what is an object of care and concern, and who or what is

[228] What makes this kind of shame particularly corrosive, Bartky argues, is exactly that these "feelings" fail to "attain the status of belief." Bartky, "Shame and Gender," 94-95.
[229] Bartky, 95.
[230] David Haekwon Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian-American Experience," 116.

an object of fear, disgust, shame, etc.[231] That I, as a subject, feel a particular emotion is very often in line with this order and in conflict with my own beliefs about myself.[232]

According to thinkers like Kim and Bartky (as well as psychologists like Sylvan Tomkins, as we'll see later), there is no emotion without affectivity: in order to be afraid, I have to *care* about a threat; in order to be ashamed, I have to care about my status or lowliness; etc. It is unclear whether this dimension of affective "intentionality" is meaningfully distinct from the kind of evaluations or judgments that other philosophers would call "cognitive." For phenomenologists like Anthony Steinbock, the "fact" of the emotion—i.e., the experience itself—precedes reflection or self-assessment. I take it that this presents a slightly different picture: affectivity is not just indispensable, but primary and prior. In his description of shame, Steinbock argues that, "The negative valence that occurs in and through the shame-experience...does not arise primordially from a reflective self-assessment or self-judgment. Such a negative valence...occurs *prior* to a negative self-judgment."[233]

Ultimately, my concern is not to either adopt nor disprove cognitivism, but only to dispute those cognitivist theories that treat affectivity as contingent or unnecessary for emotion. This is important to note since the view I want to resist is, by my estimation, the one most often held in mainstream political philosophy, for instance in Nussbaum. Nussbaum and others, in my view, only revalue emotion by downplaying or severing its attachment with the body and affectivity. Instead, I propose a social, embodied, and physiological account of emotion that emphasizes the affective, or "feeling," in the emotional.

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[231] *Ibid.,* 114.

[232] Jaggar's angry feminist subject in the essay "Anger and Subordination," is the case of a person who feels angry and her anger is an accurate appraisal, or judgment, about reality. The case that Bartky and Haekwon Kim discuss, on the other hand, is a member of some stigmatized group who, if their judgments were in line with their emotions would feel angry or indignant, but instead feels shame, quite against their clearly held belief.

[233] Steinbock, *Moral Emotions,* 79.

Following Sullivan, my account affirms that individuals come into subjectivity within an already existing socio-cultural nexus of meaning and value, that this nexus consists of social and object relations beyond our control, and further, that this basic *nonsovereignty* also operates at the level of physiology as the sedimentation of personal experience and genetic inheritance, i.e., the personal experiences of our ancestors. Sullivan's account thus adds a powerful description of what is going on in those situations, like the ones Bartky and Kim propose, where socially subordinated individuals experience shame without believing or judging themselves to be shame-worthy. In other words, she provides an account of physiological factors operating below or before conscious belief which might induce a set of affects that are without conscious cognitive basis. While nonsovereignty, because it implies that we give up comfortable/comforting notions of individual autonomy, self-reliance and -sufficiency, seems to be at odds with liberal or neoliberal accounts of freedom (understood as negative liberty), both Arendt and later Judith Butler gesture to another tradition of freedom that actually relies on our necessary relations of interdependency. For emotion too, the fact that the affects of others *affect us*—press upon, impinge on, or get a rise out of us—need not lead us to the conclusion that they are therefore opposed to either freedom, individual distinctness, or creativity. With Sullivan, I want to explore the possibility that even bodily sensations/events that seem purely automatic and unconnected to broader context, for instance hunger pangs, can nevertheless constitute meaningful emotional experiences that are revelatory of our social, moral, and political relationships. Like Sullivan, Lauren Berlant argues that, "the visceral response is a trained thing, not just autonomic activity. Intuition is where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention."[234]

Whether or not emotions necessarily include a cognitive component like belief or judgment, it remains the case that without raising our feelings—as Jaggar puts it, our "gut-level knowledge"—to

[234] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 52.

conscious awareness of some kind, we are likely to remain puzzled by these experiences. That is, we are likely to accept that bodily events have no significance beyond their role in automatic biological processes, and *unlikely* to suspect that there could be a larger socio-cultural story underlying them. Like Sullivan then, I want to bring some aspects of our gut-level knowledge to conscious awareness by integrating the physiological as a social phenomenon that does not reduce it to some biological essentialism. Certainly, the reactionary *antibiologism* of Arendt and others does not formulate a better theory of politics and action by excluding the body, they only succeed in diminishing the esteem in which certain political actors and political modes are held.

III. Emotional Baggage: Emotion and necessity in Arendt's *On Revolution*

Having posited the relevance of emotion for political action and explored a bit the traditions in philosophy and affect studies that theorize that relevance, I would now like to bring those resources to bear on the action-theory animating Hannah Arendt's work. What I want to suggest is that Arendt fundamentally misunderstands what emotions are and what they do, and that consequently, the theory of action emerging out of this misunderstanding is seriously warped. It is noteworthy, and even a little ironic, that Arendt's own fear—fear that fear itself would destroy the political realm—in part structures how she theorizes and consequently excludes emotion from the sphere of action. The role of emotion in the rise of totalitarianism and mass behavior in 20th century Europe means that this fear is not irrational, but it is sometimes unwarranted, and in any case, too general.

My strategy in this section will be to examine how Arendt's theorization of the body—as private and therefore pre- or non-political—intersects with the theorization of revolution in the 1963 book *On Revolution*. My aim is to show how a theory of emotion, along with an account of the role of

emotion in political action, materializes at that intersection. The connections Arendt draws in *On Revolution* between biological necessity, misery, and terror paints a stark picture of political ruin. Drawing on her descriptions of rage and compassion, it is possible to anticipate a broader theory of emotion orienting Arendt's work which says that emotions are inevitable, uncontrollable, and ultimately un-free aspects of human experience; they are indistinguishable from biological drives and serve subjective interests; and finally, they reside solely in the private heart of each individual and must remain hidden there lest they spoil the promise of political action.

Arendt's argument in *On Revolution* is both historical and philosophical. She compares the American and French Revolutions of the 18th century in the hopes of developing a general theory of revolution that emphasizes "proper" political action driven by principles of freedom and equality, and de-emphasizes the mute action of violence driven by material necessity and misery. The role of emotion emerges as a core aspect of this comparison, since Arendt identifies miserable social conditions in Europe and the emotions of suffering they inspired—a fateful mixture of rage, compassion, and pity—as "the chief, and perhaps the only reason, why the principles that inspired the men of the first revolutions were triumphantly victorious in America and failed tragically in France."[235] *On Revolution,* then, is not just the place where Arendt tries to concretely articulate—that is, historically instantiate—the action-theory of politics drawn earlier and more abstractly in *The Human Condition*, but it is also the place where she directly addresses the role of emotion in that action-theory. For her, "revolution" is not just an example of political action, it is exemplar. Therefore, what we may glean from examining the revolutionary tradition closely is a deeper understanding of how concepts like freedom, natality, necessity, and emotion are made to relate within the action-theory more broadly.

[235] Hannah Arendt, "The Freedom to be Free," *The New England Review* 38, no. 2, (2017): 62.

Arendt's treatment of revolution shows that according to her account, emotion is fundamentally antithetical to freedom, and therefore apolitical and even anti-political.

Many readers find fault with Arendt's historical account of the revolutionary period, especially her rosy view of the American experience, which consigns a major feature of that experience—the institution of slavery—to little more than a footnote. I won't use this occasion to weigh in on issues of historical accuracy, since what I'm interested in is how Arendt's description of the French and American revolutions, accurate or no, is used to bolster a particular account of the relationship between emotion and action. While "action" is a notoriously difficult concept to define in Arendt's work, *On Revolution* provides the closest thing to a description of the *experience* of "being free" that could help illuminate the *practice* of freedom, *viz.* action.[236] Arendt's account of politics, as we've seen, is normative in that it distinguishes the impoverished, commonplace notion of politics from what she calls "the political": a space and a practice of "action in concert" understood as free collaboration amongst equals that creates something new. "Revolution" epitomizes "action" because "the meaning of revolution is the actualization of one of the greatest and most elementary human potentialities the unequaled experience of *being* free to make a new beginning."[237] The emphasis on "*being"* present in Arendt's original text is meant to underline how freedom became an active practice, and not merely an object, property, or negative liberty. As Arendt goes to pains to repeat throughout the text, the meaning of "freedom" itself transformed during the revolutionary period and *through* the experience of the revolutions, which "put the question of political freedom in its truest and most radical form—

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[236] "What the revolutions brought to the fore was this experience of being free...And this relatively new experience, new to those at any rate who made it, was at the same time the experience of man's faculty to begin something new. These two things together – a new experience which revealed man's capacity for novelty – are at the root of the enormous pathos which we find in both the American and the French Revolutions, this ever-repeated insistence that nothing comparable in grandeur and significance had ever happened in the whole recorded history of mankind, and which, if we had to account for it in terms of successful reclamation of civil rights, would sound entirely out of place." Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 34.

[237] Arendt, "Freedom to be Free," 68.

freedom to participate in public affairs, freedom of action[...]"[238] This distinctly positive freedom should be distinguished from other political and civil liberties that do not, of necessity, require the kind of republican form of government that guarantees equal participation in public affairs. Since the product of action just is this experience of political freedom, it is significant that the American Revolution is characterized by a rather sanitized account of "public happiness," while the French Revolution is overdetermined by terror, misery, and suffering. Arendt attributes the crux of this distinction, as we'll see, to different material conditions on the ground.

It is important to note that Arendt reserves a specific meaning for "revolution" separate from its generic usage by distinguishing revolution from liberation: while "revolutions" are concerned with freedom *to* participate in politics, while "liberation" is concerned with freedom *from* fear and want. So while a successful revolution necessarily involves liberation from oppression—the oppressive conditions of dictatorship, of poverty, etc.—liberation does not automatically result in revolution. Revolution specifically denotes the creation of something radically new, a free and revolutionary act of foundation for freedom and action to continue. For this reason, she thinks there are no genuine revolutions prior to the 18th century: "where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution...[T]he eagerness to liberate *and* to build a new house where freedom can dwell, is unprecedented and unequalled in all prior history."[239] For Arendt, the experience of revolutionary action reveals important insights about what it means to be fully human:

> To be free and to start something new were felt to be the same. And obviously, this mysterious human gift, the ability to start something new, has something to do with the fact that every one of us came into the world as a newcomer through birth....Insofar as the capacity for acting and speaking—and speaking is but another mode of acting—makes us political beings, and since acting always has meant to set

[238] *Ibid.,* 69.
[239] *Ibid.,* 35. This experience was so new, she argues, that a word didn't even exist to describe it: "...although there were enough words in premodern political language to describe the uprising of subjects against a ruler, there was none which would describe a change so radical that the subjects became rulers themselves." (*Ibid.,* 41)

> something in motion that was not there before, birth, human natality, which corresponds to human mortality, is the ontological condition sine qua non of all politics.

All this and more "came to the fore in the experiences of revolution." So in the experience of revolution, the revolutionaries discovered their capacity for newness, and with it, their passion for action. It was by studying these revolutions that Arendt herself perhaps discovered the significance of this capacity, which she called "natality," and which is so central to her account of "the human condition."

But what determines whether the course of political events ends with liberation or revolution? For Arendt, this distinction lies in a material and conceptual opposition between freedom and necessity, and philosophically, the opposition between freedom and necessity reflects and reinforces the opposition between political and social. While the American Revolution was primarily characterized by a desire for political freedom, the French Revolution, she argues, was driven by the necessity of alleviating material want:

> The direction of the American Revolution remained committed to the foundation of freedom and the establishment of lasting institutions, and to those who acted in this direction nothing was permitted that would have been outside the range of civil law. The direction of the French Revolution was deflected almost from its beginning from this course of foundation through the immediacy of suffering; it was determined by the exigencies of liberation not from tyranny but from necessity, and it was actuated by the limitless immensity of both the people's misery and the pity this misery inspired. The lawlessness of the "all is permitted" sprang here still from the sentiments of the heart whose very boundlessness helped in the unleashing of a stream of boundless violence.[240]

It's worth quoting this passage at length because it provides a loose outline of the central argument presented in *On Revolution* as a whole. In short: Where poverty and abject misery exist on a large scale, revolutions will always end in failure, since the masses are exclusively concerned with alleviating their own suffering, and everyone else is consumed with pity for them. In both cases, the lengths they will

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[240] Arendt, *On Revolution,* 92.

go to are endless, often violent, and anyway, not political. Moreover, this boundlessness specifically springs from "the sentiments of the heart" which are themselves boundless, i.e., uncontrollable, irresistible, violent.

The immensity of misery, then, "inspired" an immensity of feeling that overdetermined the political aims of the revolution. We must be free *from* our bodily necessities before political freedom can occupy the public realm – until then, the public is merely the non-political space where social problems, "household" concerns, are brought to light. Arendt writes that, "The most powerful necessity of which we are aware in self-introspection is the life process which permeates our bodies and keeps them in a constant state of a change whose movements are automatic, independent of our own activities, and irresistible – i.e., of an overwhelming urgency."[241] The life process and everything bound up with it, to which Arendt will eventually add emotion, is characterized by these constant urgencies, to which all humans are subject *in the same way*. Arendt regrets this inconvenience for at least two reasons: a) the life process requires that we meet certain necessary material conditions in order to be in the world, and this "necessity" implies an element of determinism that is opposed to freedom and will; and b) at the level of material necessity, all living things are alike, and this not only flattens human distinctness (between other humans), but it flattens the uniqueness of humanity writ large (between humans and other animals). After all, she reasons, humans are the political animal and the animal endowed with speech. Necessity, however, reduces human beings to animals without politics, without freedom or action, and therefore, without those things that make humanity human.

When life itself becomes the subject of politics, we get "the rise of the social" whose rule is conformity according to this "life process," rather than distinctness and plurality. The automation of the life process becomes central under certain political conditions – for instance, mass consumer culture, totalitarianism, and mass impoverishment --

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[241] *Ibid.,* 59.

> Poverty is more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force; poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under the absolute dictate of necessity as all men know it from their most intimate experience and outside all speculations. It was under the rule of this necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution, inspired it, drove it onward, and eventually sent it to its doom, for this was the multitude of the poor. When they appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them, and the result was that the power of the old regime became impotent and the new republic was stillborn; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself.[242]

Arendt refers to the French Revolution as "stillborn" because while the French succeeded in liberating themselves from their monarch, they failed to give birth to their full potential: the creation of a new foundation for the distinctly political freedom that characterizes all action. What is important to notice is that the revolution is stillborn because, according to Arendt, it was primarily driven by the urgencies of bodily necessity (poverty), which on her definition precludes the freedom, spontaneity, and plurality essential for action. Instead, "*les misérables*" could not hope to act freely precisely because their movements were characterized by the irresistibility, automation, and uniformity of the life process itself. Meanwhile: "[S]ince the laborious in America were poor but not miserable...they were not driven by want, and the revolution was not overwhelmed by them. The problem they posed was not social but political, it concerned not the order of society but the form of government."[243] Arendt is quick to discount and exclude bodies that feel too much—too much hunger, for instance—from acting in the public sphere, since this suffering becomes too "overwhelming." But how exactly does a movement that has achieved liberation become "overwhelmed" by misery? (Compare this to someone like Butler, who claims that we act *from* precarity.)

The suffering and misery that belong to "the social question" encourage the circulation of certain emotions, according to Arendt. Interestingly, it is as if *les misérables* themselves are already excluded from consideration in this discussion: the emotions she chooses to examine most closely are

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[242] *Ibid.,* 60.
[243] *Ibid.,* 68.

compassion and pity, and from the perspective of the spectator who witnesses the suffering of the masses but does not share in it. This suggests, perhaps, that she has already privileged the perspective of privilege in her account – and of course, this would be consistent with the view that political action requires freedom from material necessity. As the following passage further makes clear, the distinction between freedom and necessity has important consequences for the role of emotion in political action:

> The *malheureux* whom the French Revolution had brought out of the darkness of their misery were a multitude only in the mere numerical sense...[W]hat urged them on was the quest for bread, and the cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice. In so far as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same, and may as well unite into one body...The political trouble which misery of the people holds in store is that manyness can infact assume the guise of oneness, that suffering indeed breeds moods and emotions and attitudes that resemble solidarity to the point of confusion, and that – last, not least – pity for the many is easily confounded with compassion for one person when the "compassionate zeal" can fasten upon an object whose oneness seems to fulfil the prerequisites of compassion, while its immensity, at the same time, corresponds to the boundlessness of sheer emotion. Robespierre once compared the nation to the ocean; it was indeed the ocean of misery and the ocean-like sentiments it aroused that combined to drown the foundations of freedom.[244]

What precisely is Arendt's beef here? If we recall the action-theory described in chapter one, natality is only one of its necessary aspects. Genuine politics, for her, is distinguished by this capacity to begin something new as well as a *plurality* of acting agents. Here, she argues that the French Revolution destroyed its promise by sacrificing plurality for bread. Suffering, "breeds moods and emotions and attitudes that resemble solidarity to the point of confusion" – in other words, the emotions associated with suffering dissolve plurality because "the cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice." This cry will inevitably destroy freedom: on one side by collapsing manyness into oneness, and on the other by arousing undifferentiated pity *for* the many.[245]

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[244] *Ibid.,* 94.

[245] Alison Jaggar helps to contextualize Arendt's description of the role of emotion during the French Revolution as "ocean-like sentiments [that] combined to drown the foundations of freedom." Jaggar writes, "The modern redefinition of rationality required a corresponding reconceptualization of emotion. This was achieved by portraying emotions as nonrational and often irrational urges that regularly swept the body, rather *as a storm sweeps over the land*. The common way of referring to the emotions as the 'passions' emphasized that emotions happened to or were imposed upon an individual, something she suffered rather than something she did." Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," 146.

If we follow Arendt's reasoning a bit closer, what we notice is that the "cry for bread," an emotional expression of suffering as anguish, pain, anger, etc. is presumed to destroy plurality because it is connected with physical misery—i.e., hunger—and *presumably* all bodies are the same, subject to the same needs, and experiencing them in the same way. A comment that Arendt makes in a later work confirms this:

> Inside organs, on the contrary, are never pleasing to the eye; once forced into view, they look as though they had been thrown together piecemeal and, unless deformed by disease or some peculiar abnormality, they appear alike; not even the various animal species, let alone individuals, are easy to tell from each other by the mere inspection of their intestines....The inside, the functional apparatus of the life process, is covered up by an outside which, as far as the life process is concerned, has only one function, namely, to hide and protect it, to prevent its exposure to the light of an appearing world. If this inside were to appear, we would all look alike.[246]

If material necessity—all that which poverty deprives—can be understood as an aspect of the life process that Arendt invokes here, then not only does necessity dissolve human uniqueness, flatten plurality, and destroy freedom, by having the audacity to make its appearance in the world, it also betrays its own nature.

In Arendt's view then, the problem with the French Revolution was that it "opened up the gates of the political realm to the poor" who, driven by their suffering and rage, infected it with their very presence, transforming the political realm into a "social" realm only concerned with the necessities of life. Therefore, she reasons, it shouldn't really be considered a proper (political) revolution at all. So it's not just that the "life process" overstepped its bounds by entering the public realm and becoming the subject of action, but those concerned with the life process—the poor—overstepped *their* bounds, became uppity, when they should have kept their miseries to themselves, in private. In other words, they got angry. Arendt already decried the increasing significance of emotion (intimacy) for public life in *The Human Condition.* In *On Revolution* she meant to drive the point home:

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[246] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind,* 29.

Just like the "household" concerns of biological life attained public significance in the "cry for bread," the emotions, which by their nature should have remained in the private realm, and restricted to the introspection of the subject, had burst into the public sphere. *Les misérables* themselves, whose suffering she associates with one emotion in particular: rage. She argues that "rage is indeed the only form in which misfortune can become active," continuing: "This raging force may well nigh appear irresistible because it lives from and is nourished by the necessity of biological life itself. It is indeed as though the forces of the earth were allied in benevolent conspiracy with this uprising, whose end is impotence, whose principle is rage, and whose conscious aim is not freedom but life and happiness."[247] Suffering "explodes into rage when it can no longer endure," and although rage is not impotent, it cannot, according to Arendt, achieve anything political and does not constitute action.

We need only look at Arendt's description of the Women's March to Versailles, a turning point in the French Revolution, to grasp concretely how she seeks to oppose not only bodily necessity and political principle, emotion and action, but women who are mothers and their so-called "household" concerns with the elevated political aims of the "men of the revolution." Arendt associates the suffering of *les misérables,* including the women who marched on Versailles, with one emotion in particular: Rage. She argues that "rage is indeed the only form in which misfortune can become active," continuing: "This raging force may well nigh appear irresistible because it lives from and is nourished by the necessity of biological life itself. It is indeed as though the forces of the earth were allied in benevolent conspiracy with this uprising, whose end is impotence, whose principle is rage, and whose conscious aim is not freedom but life and happiness."[248] Suffering "explodes into rage when it can no longer endure," and although rage is not impotent, it cannot, according to Arendt, achieve anything

[247] Arendt, *On Revolution,* 110-112.
[248] *Ibid.,* 110-112.

political and does not constitute action. These women, who spontaneously marched on The Palace at Versailles in October 1789 over the price and scarcity of bread, quoting Lord Acton:

> "[Played] the genuine part of mothers whose children were starving in squalid homes, and they thereby afforded to motives, which they neither share nor understood [i.e., concern with government] the aid of a diamond point that nothing could withstand." What *le people,* as the French understood it, brought to the revolution...was the irresistibility of a movement that human power was no longer able to control. This elementary experience of irresistibility—as irresistible as the motions of stars—brought forth an entirely new imagery, which still today we almost automatically associate in our thoughts of revolutionary events....Or what the spectators reported—a "majestic lava stream which spares nothing and which nobody can arrest," a spectacle that had fallen under the sign of Saturn, "the revolution devouring its own children" (Vergniaud).[249]

Here, women represent the multitude, the masses in the street who ultimately drowned the loftier political "motives" of the revolutionaries in their rage and misery. This "diamond point," a defining moment in the confrontation between the people and the monarchy, was for Arendt merely the blind force exploited by the "true" revolutionaries—men with higher ambitions and serving higher principles than bread. I won't fully elaborate on the confusion that it produces to realize that for Arendt, the women's march to Versailles was not political, but rather a "turning point" in the French Revolution's descent into terror, nor the sting of realizing that the power of this maternal rage was, for her, essentially useless outside the aims it could be *put to use* by men.

Recall that genuine politics, for Arendt, is distinguished by this capacity to begin something new as well as a *plurality* of actors. Suffering, however, "breeds moods and emotions and attitudes that resemble solidarity to the point of confusion." Following Arendt's reasoning a bit closer, what we notice is that the "cry for bread," an emotional expression of suffering as anguish, pain, anger, etc. is believed to destroy plurality because of its connection with physical misery—i.e., hunger. Hunger, a basic biological drive, is presumably experienced by all living bodies in the same way, and therefore action rooted in hunger collapses many-ness into one-ness. Emotions, according to her, "abolish the

[249] Arendt, "Freedom to Be Free," 65.

distance" between individuals that is essential for plurality and thus for political action. And this distance, what she elsewhere refers to as "the in-between," is necessary to preserve the distinctness that separates individuals and prevents them from falling over each other into the writhing masses that characterize the abolition of difference, thinking, and morality in totalitarianism.[250] It seems that it is *because of,* and not despite, the women who marched on Versailles—who "played the genuine part of mothers"—that Arendt declares the French Revolution "stillborn."[251] Here again we see that natality is a political principle opposed to social and political reality, and to specifically maternal embodiments. The role of emotion and of women is mutually constituted in Arendt's account of action: we are perhaps in awe of the strength and determination of women but find politically impotent and even politically regressive or impossible the idea that this strength would serve political action.

Bound up in these descriptions of rage and compassion is a whole background constellation of problematic presuppositions linking the body, biology, and necessity as a set opposed to freedom, creativity, spontaneity, and distinctness; i.e., the very content of action. The misery of abject poverty breeds negative emotions of suffering that are as irresistible, inevitable, and common an experience as hunger. Emotions derive from, and are often directly concerned with, the biological life process and issues of necessity and deprivation. For these reasons, Arendt views emotion as constitutively unfree, both in the sense that emotions do not arise spontaneously but as an automatic reaction to something else (thereby serving a merely mechanical function) and in the sense that emotions are not unpredictable but are instead inevitable in both response and outcome. This aspect of unfreedom and

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[250] As we already saw in her discussion of rage, feeling with others creates an impression of "oneness" that destroys freedom. About compassion, she writes, "Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence." Both "passions"—e.g., compassion—and "sentiments"—e.g., pity, ultimately destroy the distinctness necessary for genuine plurality; in the first case because the distance between individuals is abolished, and in the latter because it is expanded too far. (Arendt, *On Revolution,* 86.)

[251] *On Revolution,* 60.

necessity leads Arendt to associate emotion almost exclusively with self-interest and economic motivation.

These considerations point to the first two aspects of Arendt's implicit affect theory that I want to contest. First, is a problematic conflation of emotions and drives. Second, the subsequent reduction of emotions to the "purely biological," understood here as prepolitical, presocial, endogenous, automatic, and unchanging. Following from both these assumptions is the idea that emotions are indistinguishable from other biological events, for instance hunger, in that they serve as automatic and irresistible responses to particular stimuli. "Biological," in this sense, refers to the "process" character of life—the biological life cycle is precisely *live* because it entails an irresistible process of birth, growth, and decay. For Arendt, emotion is a dimension of biological life and is therefore antithetical to freedom, newness, and creativity.

Arendt however deviates from her drive-centric theory at least to some extent when she frames the problem of emotion in terms of "contagion." Contagion-theories of emotion admit that there is a social dimension to emotion that exceeds the individualizing account of emotion as a purely internal event determined by subjective reflexes. Indeed, Arendt's anxiety about contagion should be understood as the product of a specific social-phobia—an idea I refer to as "separation anxiety" in the following section—that is Arendt's own thinly-veiled attempt to intellectualize and theoretically back a generalized *somatophobia*. This somatophobia, I will argue later, becomes the unexamined and uncritical organizing principle of her work as a whole. The threat of emotional contagion in the political sphere loomed large for Arendt: she believed that social movements controlled by the spread of emotion rather than reason creates the conditions for the kind of mass behavior and mass "thoughtlessness" that characterized both the Terror of the French Revolution, and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe.

To be sure, many theorists of emotion endorse some version of contagion-theory. David Hume's moral sentiment theory was an early attempt to explain a common and readily observable feature of emotion: i.e., how it is that emotions like fear, excitement/joy, anxiety, etc. seem to travel or spread within a social grouping.[252] Teresa Brennan, who gives us the fullest contemporary elaboration of a contagion-theory of emotion, describes the experience of sensing the affective flavor of a room when one walks in—sensing the anxiety or tension "in the air" without precisely having the background information to expect this tension or understand the reasons for it. Brennan takes seriously this experience, this sense that affect is "in the air" and not instead confined to individual bodies. What she calls "the transmission of affect" implies that affect moves in the space between bodies and consequently, that we can "catch" affect as if it were contagion.

What "contagion" suggests is an image of biological susceptibility that traffics, again, in the modern conception of the "passions" as that which the body "passively" suffers. This passivity implies unfreedom, and more precisely, un-will: the assumption is that if I am "infected," my feelings and actions are no longer the products of "free will." Arendt's describes the French "Terror" as an example of such contagion: emotions spread uncontrollably so that the "ocean of misery" engulfs everyone indistinguishably and in the same way. If the aim of totalitarianism, and the violence of economic thinking more broadly, was to make every subject indistinguishable and replaceable with any other, then the threat of emotion is, for Arendt, its capacity to facilitate this indistinguishability. (In order to call political action democratic, individuals must be distinct and plural; emotions, on the other hand, are an element of sameness rooted in the body and biology.) *Emotional contagion* is actively dangerous; it is sameness run amok, made public, and spread.

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[252] Contemporary work in political theory and affect studies explicitly or implicitly engage Hume's model, for instance: *Orgies of Feeling* (Anker, 2014), *Civil Passions* (Krause, 2008), *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed, 2004), *Transmission of Affect* (Brennan, 2004).

Many contemporary thinkers, however, contest the assumption that emotional contagion is synonymous with the spread of sameness. Sara Ahmed and Shannon Sullivan make the important point, in this case explicitly countering Teresa Brennan's work, that while it may be the case that we feel the atmosphere of a room when we enter it, it is not the case that every person will experience that atmosphere or react to it in the same way. Since bodies are not neutral entities, we cannot help but enter every room from a place of particularity, with a particular history, experience, and "mood." Ahmed challenges a basic account of contagion that assumes that bodies are in fact neutral and that the affective "atmosphere" is just "what is 'out there' getting 'in.'" Instead, who we are will affect how we receive that atmosphere, and how we receive it will in turn make an impression on that emotional atmosphere. In other words, there is always an element of contingency and individuation involved with exactly *how* we are permeable to the feelings of others and to the social atmosphere more broadly, so that the "transmission of emotions doesn't necessarily produce the same emotion"[253] in those who receive it.[254]

While I do not deny that emotion has the potential to do brutal work and especially, to animate dangerous political ideologies, I think we misunderstand this danger if we attribute it solely to the threat of emotional contagion. While Arendt may be right that "[if the] inside were to appear, we would all look alike," Sylvan Tomkins's work suggests that the relationship between endogenous and exogenous factors is complex, dynamic, and interdependent; there is no clear distinction between internal and external, and no clear or necessary relationship between stimuli and response.[255] Instead,

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[253] Sullivan, *Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression,* 50.

[254] "David Hume's approach to moral emotions in the eighteenth century rested precisely on a contagious model of happiness...Thinking of affects as contagious does help us to challenge an 'inside out' model of affect by showing how affects pass between bodies, affecting bodily surfaces or even how bodies surface. However, I think the concept of affective contagion tends to underestimate the extent to which affects are contingent (involving the hap of a happening): to be affected by another does not mean that an affect simply passes or 'leaps' from one body to another. The affect becomes an object only given the contingency of how we are affected, or only as an effect of how objects are given." Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects" in *The Affect Theory Reader,* eds. Gregg and Seigworth, 36.

[255] Tomkins refers to research in psychology showing that subjects have radically different responses to the exact same stimulus. The experimental use of electric shock on these subjects also contests the assumption that pain will necessarily

the affect system entails expansive freedom and creativity, a point that Arendt and other miss because they conflate the biological drives with this broader affect system. This conflation is evident, among other places, in Arendt's misguided attempt to distinguish human individuals capable of political action from other non-human "living organisms" which she says cannot actively "express otherness and individuality": she writes, "only [man] can distinguish and communicate *himself,* and not merely some affect—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility, or fear."[256]

With Tomkins, whose research is the starting point for much contemporary work in feminist affect theory, I want to instead insist on a fundamental distinction between the affect system and the drive system.[257] For Tomkins, it is the affect system and *not* the drive system that "provides the primary motives of human beings."[258] I argue that emphasizing the primacy and complexity of the affect system provides an alternative conceptual framework to the comparatively un-free, two-value picture of human behavior that drive-theories posit. The freedom and complexity of the drive-system is relatively limited in terms of time, aim, and object[259]—the hunger drive, for instance, has a single aim (alleviating hunger), is only satisfied by certain objects (edible food), and must be satisfied within a limited span of time if the hungry thing is going to survive.[260] Arendt is concerned about how the urgency of biological drives might destroy freedom and plurality. Is this same concern warranted however if we distinguish affects and emotions from drives? The affect system, by contrast, is primary (an affective state, e.g., depression, can render the hunger drive powerless) and complex (affects can

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elicit negative affects in response, since many of the subjects reported experiencing positive affects in response to the shocks. (Sylvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Sylvan Tomkins Reader,* ed. Sedgwick and Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 11)

256 Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," *Thinking without a Banister* (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 304.

257 Keeping in mind that, as Sedgwick points out, "For Tomkins, the difference between the drive system and the affect system is not that one is more rooted in the body than the other; he understands both to be thoroughly embodied, as well as more or less intensively interwoven with cognitive processes. The difference instead is between more specific and more general, more and less constrained: between biologically based systems that are less and more capable of generating complexity or degrees of freedom." Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 18.

258 Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters,* eds. Sedgwick and Frank, 37.

259 Tomkins, 49.

260 See Eve Sedgwick's discussion in *Touching Feeling* (p. 19) for a fuller discussion of this distinction in freedom.

combine with other affects and objects in seemingly endless combinations). To understand the primacy of the affect system, it is enough to remember that "one's hunger drive can be no stronger than one's excitement...about eating...Excitement, rather than being a derivative of drives, is the major source of drive amplification."[261] The amplifying function of the affect system, then, is figured as analog rather than digital, and produces freedom and complexity of behavior in degrees rather than binaries. For Tomkins, interest/excitement is the fundamental affective support for a variety of "subsystems," including the drive system, since, "To think, as to engage in any other human activity, one must care, one must be excited, must be continually rewarded."[262] From the primacy and complexity of the affect system, as I and many feminist theorists of emotion would argue, we get an expansive freedom.[263]

Returning to the example of the Women's March on Versailles then, it is clear that Arendt recognizes the amplifying function of affect—after all, she refers to the rage of the women who marched on Versailles as the "diamond point that nothing could withstand"—and yet she *refuses* to acknowledge the freedom, creativity, and complexity of this collective action. In other words, she denies the Women's March political status, and with it, normative value. Indeed, she called it "stillborn."

The approach that Arendt pursues is clearly marked by a confusion, which Tomkins's work clarifies, of the affects and the drives. Along with uncritically accepting a distinctly Freudian reverence for the power, urgency, and universality of these drives—and on that basis disavowing all emotion—

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[261] Tomkins, 76.

[262] Tomkins, 77.

[263] The freedom and complexity of the affect system, in contrast to the drive system, arises from a few important distinctions. First, as I discuss above, the affect system is analog rather digital and therefore admits of "finitely many (n>2) values" (Tomkins, 15). Second, the affect system is fundamentally free with respect to its objects. In other words, in contrast to drives, affects are free from any one specific consummatory site (57) and "[there] is literally no kind of object which has not historically been linked to one or another of the affects" (54). Third, affects freely combine with other affects creating more complex emotions and intensifying or reducing other affects (56). Finally, against the behaviorist and cognitive psychologists intent to make the mind transparent, Tomkins argues that what goes on between stimulus and response—if that distinction can even be made—is opaque in its complexity, involving "endogenous and exogenous, perceptual, proprioceptive, and interpretive—causes, effects, feedbacks, motives, long-term states such as moods ad theories, along with distinct transitory physical or verbal events" (11). This view is supported by psychological experiments that show that different subjects will have radically different responses to the very same stimulus.

Arendt also betrays a Cartesian faith in reason untainted by the body, which she associates with maleness and political principle (indeed, she uses the catch-all phrases "men of the revolution" and "men of letters" interchangeably throughout her account of revolutionary action). In the next section, I ask: What are the political possibilities that moving away from a drive-centric theory of emotion opens up? I argue that rethinking the connection between suffering and emotion opens up space to appreciate the freedom, complexity, and power that the affective dimensions of action lend to politics, because and not despite the fact that political actors are also embodied, biological organisms.

IV. Separation Anxieties: Arendt's feminist critics

As Arendt's discussion in *On Revolution* clearly exposes, the opposition of freedom and necessity only constitutes a theory of political action (here, revolutionary action) by presupposing the existence of a privileged domain (the public sphere) *free from* material necessity. As we've seen, freedom from necessity requires "unfree" labor—usually provided by women, working-class, and enslaved people—in order for "men of action" to act on the basis of political principles. Moreover, this space for action is often won by the violent labors of liberation, which are animated by emotions like rage, compassion, and grief. These emotions, according to Arendt, make up "the diamond point" of the revolution, but they are not themselves political or revolutionary. In fact, they threaten to overcome the principles of the revolution if allowed to extend too far.

Arendt is not known for her theory of emotion, and for good reason – indeed, her account is one that nobody currently working in affect studies would endorse. Further, as I explored in the previous section, the emotion-theory that she develops is clearly tied to a particular historical experience and

particular gendered and racialized anxieties. And yet, this is not an aspect of her work that can simply be ignored. The broader aim of the dissertation is to explore how when it comes to theorizing the political, emotions are not merely a(n unfortunate) secondary property we use to describe (and often dismiss) political action, but that emotion should be understood as a mode of action in its own right. In this section however, I want to examine how recent debates within feminist philosophy bear on key Arendtian concepts of the political. What this will show is that there is already a rich tradition in feminist political theory critiquing how Arendt *uncritically* identifies biological life and unfreedom, and that this offers resources for understanding how the role of emotion is thereby implicated, reduced, and, ultimately, dismissed. While the majority of these feminist theorists, like Butler, critique Arendt's body politics—and indeed, Arendt's misrecognition of the body's role in politics—they do not adequately consider how emotion is an indispensable dimension of what it means to be embodied and to act politically. Their critiques therefore have the effect of diminishing emotion through omission (despite the commitments of many of these thinkers to re-valuing the culturally feminine) and rendering invisible the unique contributions of affect to political action (such as motivation, intentionality, and sustenance).

As I argued in the previous section, Arendt views the body as an unambiguous signifier of necessity and views bodily concerns and activities as strictly opposed to the freedom, plurality, and spontaneity that characterize genuine political action. Bodies then, and by extension emotions,[264]

[264] I do not develop my full account of this "extension" here, but I will briefly gesture to it by way of Sara Ahmed, who writes: "It is significant that the word 'passion' and the word 'passive' share the same root in the Latin word for 'suffering' (passio). To be passive is to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt as suffering. The fear of passivity is tied to the fear of emotionality, in which weakness is defined in terms of a tendency to be shaped by others. Softness is narrated as a proneness to injury. The association between passion and passivity is instructive. It works as a reminder of how 'emotion' has been viewed as 'beneath' the faculties of thought and reason. To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body. Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as 'closer' to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment." Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* New York: Routledge, (2015): 3.

represent pre-political concerns: somatic and physiological needs must be alleviated before action can begin and freedom can reign. In other words, the public political realm, understood as a normative ideal, is precisely free *from* the interruptions, mess, and chaos of such concerns.[265]

As I discuss briefly in the Introduction, much political philosophy has discredited or ignored the role of affect in political life and instead privileged reason. This is largely rooted, I have argued, in philosophy's equally long history of contempt for the existence of the body, distrust for the senses and the emotions or passions, and disdain for the whole realm of earthly materiality upon which life depends, to which women are usually confined. Arendt herself traces and sometimes criticizes this history. She accuses traditional philosophers, especially some of her contemporaries, of producing a metaphysics characterized by death-obsession. Instead, her turn to politics installs the concept of *natality* in place of mortality.[266] At the same moment—practically in the same breath—however, Arendt undermines the significance of natality by banishing the corporeal to the "private realm" of the household and materiality to the "social sphere" of necessity. For instance, the concept of natality itself becomes a political principle opposed to social and political *reality*, and specifically opposed to real embodiments of natality in the maternal subject. Despite the clear intuitive connections between, on the one hand, women and birth, and on the other, birth and action, Arendt nowhere links women and action. Nowhere. What Arendt's treatment of the Women's March discussed in the previous section brings into focus, then, is the close connection between the role of emotion and of women in

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[265] Some loyal Arendt scholars claim that thinking embodiment in Arendt is more nuanced than her critics (like me) would have us believe. I believe however that these scholars largely miss the point: Even though one might be able to infer the presence of the body from an off-hand reference to a "voice" in *The Human Condition,* for instance, it is still the case that when the body does appear in Arendt, we are encouraged to assume that this is a white, male, heterosexual body. The body of the political subject is not concrete, but universal, whereas the productive and reproductive body excluded from the public realm precisely *is* concrete.

[266] "[The] new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought." Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 9. For an extended discussion of the meaning and role of the concept of *natality* in Arendt's work, see Anne O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

her account of political action. This is something that feminist philosophers have been pointing to in other contexts for generations.

In feminist Arendt scholarship in particular, this "antagonism to the presence of the body in politics" [267] is most clearly etched in the private/public distinction. To put it simply, the private/public distinction is designed to define the subjects, activities, and functions of "the household" in order to preserve the "public square" as a space devoted to action alone, and hence freedom *from* the social and biological demands of the body. Seyla Benhabib aptly terms this methodology "phenomenological existentialism," or the "belief that each type of human activity has its proper 'place' in the world, and that this place is the only authentic space in which this kind of activity can truly unfold."[268] What I want to emphasize is that the private/public distinction, is an artificial designation in service of a normative project. This is important, because on its own the terms "separation" or "distinction" give the false impression of being value-neutral.[269] Instead, Arendt's political theory is normative in the following sense: "Action" is the uniquely human/humanizing activity to which all others (including Labor and Work) are subordinate, and "the political" is that domain created by action that is constituted in its freedom only by excluding from it persons engaged in the *unfree* activities connected with labor and work. This normative project, as I'd like to suggest, is itself highly suspect since it is bolstered by a number of dubious presuppositions related to embodiment and biological life that feminist scholars have challenged for decades. For these thinkers, "separation" does not accurately convey the elements of hierarchy and injustice that stratify this normative account and therefore, they are not just "separations," but spurious *exclusions*. For Arendt, the body is only relevant for *pre*-political concerns related to the preservation of biological life.

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[267] Bonnie Honig ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt,* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press (1995): 9.
[268] Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and Public Space," *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1993): 104.
[269] Philosophers Seyla Benhabib, Patchen Markell, and Judith Butler pay particular attention to the functions of such separations across Arendt's work, as well as the strategies behind them.

With some hermeneutic sensitivity to the historical context, it is easier to see why these distinctions were important for Arendt: for her, totalitarianism is characterized by the disappearance of genuine, spontaneous human action and therefore, she believed that the potentialities inherent to political action, though resilient, are not invulnerable. If action could be defined and given its exclusive territory however (i.e., a public space where action can appear), then it could also be better preserved and defended. Curiously, this suggests that Arendt's action-theory of politics is itself the product of a particular anxiety about the fate of action, of politics, and of humanity. (The irony that anxiety and fear about the fate of political action in part motivates her theorization of political action as non-emotional bears mentioning.)

For some, what is problematic about Arendt's work is the way these separations are deployed. For others, the separations themselves are not innocent. Kathryn S. Belle's 2014 work *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* argues the latter from the perspective of philosophy of race. Belle points out that Arendt's theoretical "separations" reflect rather than challenge social hierarchies that run counter to the principles of freedom and equality that her work claims to defend—as the book's analysis of the disastrous "Reflections on Little Rock" essay and its aftermath clearly shows, the public/private distinction is too easily complicit with actual policies of segregation and anti-black racism. There is a longer history of criticism among feminists concerned with Arendt's treatment of gender. Adrienne Rich's harsh words immediately come to mind:

> To read such a book [*The Human Condition*], by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideologies…The power of male ideology to possess such a female mind, to disconnect it as it were from the female body which encloses it and which it encloses, is nowhere more striking than in Arendt's lofty and crippled book.[270]

[270] Adrienne Rich, "Conditions for Work," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose,* New York: W. W. Norton & Co., (1979): 212.

The content, and especially the tone, of this comment is not particularly helpful, but it does pose a question about the relation between mind, body, and gender that is worth revisiting, if perhaps less from the point of view of some essentialism on the basis of sex. Why would a "woman of large spirit and great erudition" exclude femininity, corporeality, and affectivity from her account of politics?

The "tragic" aspect of this, as I read Rich, is that one hopes that "a woman of great spirit and erudition" would challenge rather than further reify existing social hierarchies. As Arendt has it, however, women, racial others, and the working class—all those characterized by too much embodiment—are only permitted to enter the public realm if they can somehow leave their bodies behind. Separating the private from the public, the social from the political, can only produce absurdity and social stratification, because it means confining certain activities and certain people to the private realm and dismissing their concerns as merely "social" and therefore not worthy of public political debate. Consequently, those confined to the private and social domains, are dispossessed of exactly what Arendt claims makes us all uniquely and wonderfully human: our capacity for action. Arendt's fanaticism about distinctions such as the private/public distinction is not, then, only a socio-political problem, according to which those excluded from the space and activity of the public realm have no recognized recourse but to remain there, but it is also an existential-ontological claim delineating proper political subjects and their constitutive exclusion, *mere* humans engaged in labor and reproduction.[271] Suddenly, if somewhat circuitously, it seems the only ones in Arendt's view who *are* human are a privileged few. As Mary Dietz points out, the fundamental human activities that Arendt describes "have actually been lived out as either male or female *identities*."[272] According to Arendt's hierarchical ordering of these activities, women and people of color, who are quickly associated with

[271] See Howard, 2017. Although I have challenged some aspects of this reading of Arendt (for instance in Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?"), I agree that her "separations" and their implications remain troubling.
[272] Mary Dietz, "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics," In *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*. Eds. Mary Shanley and Carole Pateman. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991: 241.

"labor"—materially, historically, and symbolically—and are thus barred from the domain of "action," the political realm.

The "man of action" that Arendt describes thus clearly depends on the labor and production of others, and additionally, "man" should not be taken as a universal, gender-neutral signifier. Dietz limits her critique to women, but this is also true of other exploited groups, including the working class, slaves, and racial others. Arendt's conceptualization of freedom as a specifically political practice, likewise relies on the exploited labor of those confined to the private, social, and therefore "unfree" domains. We might then ask to what extent Arendt is merely refiguring philosophy's traditional playbooks, and not the radical, category-bursting thinker that her devotees make her out to be.[273]

Indeed, Arendt's feminist critics are quite divided in their reception of her work, especially when it comes to her articulation of gender. In their efforts to criticize and reconceptualize the relationship between the body and politics, these scholars typically fall into patterns reminiscent of those that continue to animate much debate in feminist scholarship broadly. On the one hand, difference feminists try to elevate the social position of women by elevating the activities that Arendt and others typically associate with them (this involves revaluing the private sphere of the household, including activities attached to the production and reproduction of biological life) while on the other hand, poststructuralist feminists emphasize the dangers of essentialism—and self-recusal from political activity—that comes from overemphasis on the body and reproduction. The latter implicitly suggest the dissolution of these categories by emphasizing the activities of speech and deliberation instead. Meanwhile some among the former have tried to interrupt the normative assignments associated with these "separations" either by elevating so-called private issues to the level of public-

[273] It is clear in *The Human Condition* that Arendt self-consciously returns to the structure of Ancient Greek society. While the Ancient philosophers depended on others in order to pursue the contemplative life (*vita contemplative*), Arendt notes that we depend on others in order to *act* as well. In order to preserve a space for politics during a time in which genuine action was becoming increasingly rare, Arendt resorts to the same social distinctions that reigned during antiquity, but this time with the consequence that those capable of "acting" were the privileged few.

political concern, or by identifying modes of action unique to the space of the private realm. For some second-wave feminists, this first strategy found its own mantra in "the personal is political." They do not take issue with Arendt's feminization of the private realm as such—in fact, some praise her emphasis on "natality," identifying it as a specifically feminine power. Challenging what counts as a proper object of political concern, they affirm that "[it] is no use banishing the body, economic concerns, or the social question from public life; we do not rid ourselves of their power in that way, but only impoverish public life."[274] Other feminist thinkers attempt to theorize politics outside of prevailing androcentric frameworks by identifying specifically feminine styles of political action, for instance conspiratorial modes of power. [275] The energies of these feminist philosophers thus shift to revaluing the typically degraded activities associated with women, rather than challenging the underlying private/public distinction that gives these associations normative value.[276]

Closer to the latter strategy are poststructuralist, women of color feminisms, and even standpoint epistemologies, that warn against this "temptation to theorize from the standpoint of women's bodies."[277] On one hand, as critics like Mary Dietz and Linda Zerilli argue, these efforts do not succeed in politicizing insidious forms of oppression endemic to "the household, but only further naturalizes the underlying private/public distinction that organizes how oppression is experienced as differentially distributed along race and gender lines.[278] On the other hand, we should beware of theory's tendency to generalize from the standpoint of a particular body that is most often white. Shatema Threadcraft's work in *Intimate Justice* is particularly relevant here. Threadcraft points out that

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[274] Pitkin, 347.
[275] Bonnie Honig's account of "sororal agonism" is one example of such a feminist/feminine reconceptualization of action. (in Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted,* 2013)
[276] This strategy is bolstered by so-called "difference feminisms," including early articulations of feminist care ethics and feminist epistemology. See for instance Carol Gilligan, Alison Jaggar, Elizabeth Spelman, and Uma Narayan for compelling examples of this line of thought.
[277] Dietz, 245.
[278] This strategy is bolstered by so-called "difference feminisms," including early articulations of feminist care ethics and feminist epistemology. See for instance Carol Gilligan, Alison Jaggar, Elizabeth Spelman, and Uma Narayan for compelling examples of this line of thought.

while for white feminists of the second-wave, oppression meant being confined to the private sphere of intimate labor, for Black women pre- and post-emancipation, oppression meant the dispossession of any private sphere whatsoever – Black women were most often made to expend their intimate labor in the households of their white employers, not even having the option to care for their own children.[279]

Some feminists agree with Arendt's basic tact however, which asserts that grounding action in physiology as such, rather than granting women special power, only erodes equality and presents serious problems for theories of democratic politics. As Mary Dietz puts it, "[In] the process of unmasking the manifold faces of power"—that is, in the process of revealing the structures of female subordination in Arendt's work— "many feminist theorists have, in effect, elevated the activities of *animal laborans* as the central features of women's identity and feminist politics." These theorists, she says, do not reject the identification of women with the "world of labor," but only the idea that *animal laborans* should be the "lowest dimension of the *vita activa.*" This re-valuation of roles typically associated with women is reminiscent of the approach in some feminist care ethics, where denigrated culturally feminine values, including the moral emotions, are given attention and priority. But as critics of care ethics have pointed out, this strategy maintains specious gender dichotomies, rather than overcoming them—i.e., they redistribute social value, without challenging the existence of hierarchy as such. In Dietz's view, for instance,

> A theory of emancipatory politics must pay attention to diversity, solidarity, action-coordination, conflict, plurality, and the political equality (not sameness) of women as citizens. None of these conceptual categories are forthcoming in theories grounded on singularity, physiology, necessity, uniformity, subjectivity, and the identity of women as reproducers.[280]

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[279] Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
[280] Dietz, 245-246.

Instead of criticizing it for downplaying the role of gender, race, and class, Dietz argues that a work like *The Human Condition* "has the most to offer feminist political theory when it shifts our focus away from bodily processes and back to speech and action as the way toward the constitution of public, political life" and as what "truly advances freedom and plurality."[281] For Arendt and Dietz, "plurality" is the "*conditio sine qua non*" (indispensable condition) of politics and refers to a specifically democratic mode of relating whereby individuals are simultaneously equal to and distinct from one another. Dietz's point is that a "feminist public realm" grounded in the body and biology undermines plurality because it makes all women the same. Of course, theorists inspired by earlier generations of feminists are suspicious of the more fluid and deconstructed account of gender that this view leaves behind. They worry that without its identification with something like biological sex, the category "woman" is no longer intelligible and the political movements for women's rights, for instance, lose their base, as well as a coherent set of needs and demands.

Linda Zerilli, whose 2005 book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* brought Arendt's work back to the forefront of discussions in feminist political philosophy, argues that Arendt gives feminist theorists a "valuable alternative to the impasses associated with both the subject question and the social question"[282] that have plagued feminism's recent history as both a social and intellectual movement. Arendt's emphasis on action, Zerilli argues, helps guide contemporary feminism around the impasses of the subject question (i.e. "woman" as coherent political subject) and identity politics that stall the possibility of collective action by and for women. Consequently, Zerilli too is concerned that overemphasizing the role of physiology, identity, and material necessity could turn politics into a struggle of competing claims based on individual interests rather than politics as "a world-building practice of publicly articulating matters of common concern."[283] So on Zerilli's view, while "the

[281] Dietz, 246.
[282] Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom,* Chicago: Chicago University Press, (2005): 30-31.
[283] Zerilli, 22.

coffeehouses, living rooms, kitchens, and street corners that served as the meeting places for early second-wave feminism" allow us to appreciate an Arendtian "action-centered conception of politics,"[284] she also offers a caution: "The feminist claim 'the personal is political,' when it identifies power with politics, risks effacing the very special character of democratic politics and also underestimating the possibility that it could be driven out of the world."[285]

While I affirm that feminist political theory stands to gain a lot by taking seriously Arendt's insights, it is currently stuck between a rock and a hard place with respect to the issues of emotion and embodiment. Although I do not seek to examine political action purely from "the standpoint of women's bodies," as Dietz and Zerilli warn against above, I do advocate a return to concerns about embodiment because I view emotion as a thoroughly embodied phenomenon—just not precisely in the way that Arendt and her predecessors considered it to be. In line with poststructuralist concerns about biological essentialism, thinkers like Dietz and Zerilli have gone too far in the one direction. The result is curiously similar to many non-feminist readings of Arendt that unreflectively identify action with speech, and consequently imagine a masculine political subject while ignoring the political contributions of women, especially women of color, who have been denied access to public citizenship for most of Western history.[286] Speech—and therefore action—is implicitly theorized as either masculine or disembodied, and examples of political action that do not include speech, for instance hunger strikes, vigils, and other demonstrations, are thereby depoliticized. Meanwhile, action occurring in the "intimate sphere" does not even appear. Thus, in the process of excluding the body and biology from Arendt's action-theory, these feminist theorists end up invalidating many examples of political action which I would argue are in fact obviously and powerfully political.

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[284] *Ibid.*, 20.
[285] *Ibid.*, 23.
[286] For instance, George Kateb's influential reading in George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil,* Rowman & Allanheld: Totowa, New Jersey, 1984.

More recent work in feminist philosophy, affect studies, and philosophy of race offers alternatives to both sets of views sketched above because they increasingly theorize biology, physiology, and emotion as irreducibly social. When these terms are not wrongly reduced to simple biological "essentialism" and made the enemy of the accounts of social constructivism animating post-structuralism, woman of color feminism, and queer theory alike, philosophers can properly attend to issues related to the embodied experience of gender and race without undermining the truth that these experiences are at the same time socially constituted.[287]

I turn next to explore how this theory relates to selfhood and agency as these concepts are taken up in Judith Butler's account as an intercorporeal practice of performative action. As I will argue, Butler's development of "ethical agency," by bringing together a Foucauldian theory of subject formation and a Levinasian ethics of response, sits uncomfortably with the Arendt-inspired action in concert prominent in her work on freedom of assembly. Specifically, it brings to light and further unsettles the central question of the dissertation – what moves us to act? – by posing another question in turn: What acts when 'I' act?

[287] Shannon Sullivan's 2015 book *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* provides a particularly useful model in this regard, because she provides an account of how biology and the psychosocial are mutually implicated in embodied experience of women and people of color.

Chapter Three: "What acts when I act?" Judith Butler's Ethico-Political Account of Agency

> "As much as a perspective on the subject requires an evacuation of the first person, a suspension of the 'I' in the interests of the analysis of subject formation, so a reassumption of that first-person perspective is compelled by the question of agency.... Is there a way to affirm complicity as the basis of political agency, yet insist that political agency may do more than reiterate the conditions of subordination?"
>
> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*[288]

> "We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary in order to safeguard the *agency* of the subject. But to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency…Do we need to assume theoretically from the start a subject with agency *before* we can articulate the terms of a significant social and political task of transformation, resistance, radical democratization? If we do not offer in advance the theoretical guarantee of that agent, are we doomed to give up transformation and meaningful political practice?...In a sense, the epistemological model that offers us a pregiven subject or agent is one that refuses to acknowledge that *agency is always and only a political prerogative.* As such, it seems crucial to question the conditions of its possibility, not to take it for granted as an a priori guarantee."
>
> Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations"[289]

Introduction

In the 2013 co-authored text *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political,* Judith Butler writes:

> What I take from Arendt is the notion that there might be forms of political agency, what she would call "action," that require a self conceived as plurality. This is not a self divided up internally into separate parts, but one that comes into being, on the occasion of relations with others and so is "located" precisely in and as the relation itself. At least this seems to be one version of Arendt's view, and it follows from her efforts to criticize political sovereignty and to offer a plural and "federated" version of politics. I want to suggest that there is a "federating" of the self as well, and that this constitutes a specific way of thinking about the relational subject. But more than that, I am interested in how she delineates the domain of what is "unchosen" in life and in sociality, since whatever "agency" is possible and valuable is conditioned by an unchosen realm.[290]

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[288] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power: The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 29-30.

[289] Judith Butler in Butler and Scott ed., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 12.

[290] Athanasiou and Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013),122.

Although Butler's reception of Arendt is ambivalent or critical in most respects, they share an important kinship around this project of developing a relational theory of agency. Butler's own description of this kinship in the quote above is important for at least two reasons: First, she addresses the challenge that critiques of the subject like her own raise for agency (what earlier Zerilli called "the crisis of agency") and proposes that we locate agency, not in the autonomous individual, but "in and as the relation [of plurality] itself" – an idea she takes from Arendt; and second, she deepens Arendt's insights by extending plurality from the *inter*personal to the *intra*personal domain as a relational (but not divided) theory of the self. The conclusion we should draw from this relational (or plural) theory of the self, then, is not that individual agency is subsumed into group agency. And even less, that "action in concert" means "action in conformity." Recall Zerilli's earlier question: "If we had no sense of agency when we act politically, why would we so act?"[291] Put differently, as Butler writes in her 1997 book *Psychic Life of Power:* "As much as a perspective on the subject requires an evacuation of the first person, a suspension of the 'I' in the interests of the analysis of subject formation, so a reassumption of the first-person perspective is compelled by the question of agency."[292] Recuperating a "sense of agency," Butler's work would suggest, requires rethinking what agency means by attending to the relational dimensions of self-formation, a process that "evacuates" the first-person perspective and thereby enables *and* constrains our capacities for political action.

While Arendt theorizes a relational account of action, she largely avoids the problems and possibilities that a corresponding theory of the self raises. Moreover, Butler takes pains to bring a number of factors within the purview of political action that Arendt overtly excludes, including difference and embodiment, vulnerability, and material necessity. Specifying the changing conditions of action in concert, as Butler persuasively demonstrates, does not merely supplement Arendt's action-

[291] Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom,* 17.
[292] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power,* 29.

theory, but transforms what "Arendtian" can mean. Butler seeks, as she herself puts it, to "prepare Hannah Arendt for a Left she would not have joined."[293] That is, to enter into an agonistic struggle over the very limits of Arendt's agonistic politics, or, to work with and against Hannah Arendt. My view is that Judith Butler's work, informed by her poststructuralist critique of the subject, develops a rethinking of agency that, in turn, is essential for rethinking the emotional dimensions of relational agency, a project that she does *not* directly attempt.

Butler's "subject" is constituted in and through its relations with others. This is both an existential condition (originary) and an ongoing process (political) reminiscent of "the condition of nonsovereignty" (i.e., plurality) that Arendt describes in *The Human Condition*. For Butler, however, the plural relations that constitute our sense of self are specifically ethical and corporeal, as well as social and political. This embodied, ethical valence presents a different picture of what's really going on behind the (political) scenes, i.e., between the competing claims of the individual account of agency and the plural performative theory of action in concert. Although Butler's ethics of responsibility often abstracts from the concrete conditions and urgencies of politics, the set of questions connecting agency and action are never far. My reading of Butler emphasizes that the ethical and the political come together in relation to a question about "responsiveness," and that this is an issue wherein her debt to Arendt is particularly clear. "Responsiveness" refers to the problem of political mobilization, specifically, how an ethical solicitation becomes a political action. But given that political action is conceived as "action in concert" and that the self that acts is plural and nonsovereign, "being moved to act" is not in any way straightforward and does not point to an investigation of the Will as an autonomous, individual mental faculty. Instead, it points to the "web of relations," and the inherent

[293] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* xi.

opacity that web creates, that constitute, enable, and constrain who we are and how we do what we do. Consequently, "What acts when I act?" is similarly plural and nonsovereign; i.e., socially complex, contingent, and opaque.

How does this social theory of subject formation, characterized by uncertainty and opacity, bear on the political and political action? The first thing to note is that, for Butler, the relationality that makes subject formation a possibility is an *ethical* relationality. This does not mean, however, that our relations are thereby pre-political – indeed, when referring to human action, Butler almost always brings the ethical and political together, for instance when she writes that: "[The] very conception of human action as pervasively conditioned implies that when we ask the basic ethical and political question, how ought I to act, we implicitly reference the conditions of the world that make that act possible or, as is increasingly the case under conditions of precarity, that undermine the conditions for acting."[294] Although ethical subjectivity and political agency maintain an important dynamic throughout Butler's work, as they do here, their connections are ambiguous. In my view, this ambiguity is partly responsible for what critics identify as an "ethical turn" in her work. What critics of this "ethical turn" attempt to name, as far as I can tell, is a turn *away* from the political and, specifically, the absence of a concrete agentic subject. If correct, the de-politicization implied by an "ethical turn" threatens to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing regimes of normativity. Concerns about Butler's ethics do have a certain salience, and especially relevant to my project are those that concentrate on the loss of a concrete agentic subject. To reiterate, what these worries are probably responding to, is discomfort around the challenge that the so-called "death of the subject" brings to questions about political agency. Does emphasizing the constitutive relations that underpin subject formation dissolve identity, making it impossible to accurately account for who we are and what we do? Does it mean that all we do is not only passive and un-willed, but determined?

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[294] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* 23.

These questions, rather than undermining Butler's project, show that there are important resources to salvage there, especially in the ethical account of responsibility, that are essential for thinking through collective political action. Indeed, characterizing Butler's recent work as a turn to ethics and away from politics is disingenuous because it ignores the many ways that the ethical and political are, for Butler, still deeply intertwined via the entanglement of vulnerability and precarity. An implicit aim of this chapter is to argue that "ethical turn" poorly describes what Butler is up to, especially when it only takes the form of a critical barb, and to offer up a different reading of the ethico-political by focusing on how she actually understands the phenomenon of political mobilization. With respect to political mobilization, what we see is that Butler develops an account of ethical agency on one hand and an account of political assembly on the other; where and how these interact is never clarified.

I will argue that where the ethical and political meet in Butler's work provokes a set of questions that are useful for thinking through the "crisis of agency": How are we at once radically dependent on our relations with others and yet still *agentic?* That is, how do we possess the agency to act on the basis of ethical and political responsibilities arising, not from anything we ourselves have caused, but from *what we are,* namely relational beings*?* Indeed, the formative relations of dependency that Butler theorizes suggest an unfreedom, unchosenness, unwill, and also violence and violation, at the heart of our subjective experience of the world as constitutively relational and dependent beings. This vulnerability is what produces both the body and subjectivity as social phenomena, and therefore becomes for Butler a kind of ontology rooted in our social relations.[295] For Butler, the body is a social phenomenon

[295] From her engagements with Fanon in particular, Butler develops an ecstatic account of the body and subjectivity that locates the self *outside,* or *beside,* itself. (See Elsa Dorlin, "To be Beside Oneself: Fanon and the Phenomenology of Our Own Violence," in *Documenta 14* 7, no. 2 <http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/455_to_be_beside_of_oneself_fanon_and_the_phenomenology_of_our_own_violence>.)

since it is what exposes me to the other. While these conditions suggest a certain dispossession of the classical notion of agency (understood on the model of individual autonomy and sovereignty), Butler's project shows how they also ground a new conceptualization of agency that sees our relations as the uncertain occasions for being moved and being injured, for doing and for being "undone." Being "undone," and maintaining an openness to being undone, grounds our capacities *to do*—to *act*. Moreover, she insists, the conditions of that doing and undoing are politically induced and elicit a political "responsiveness." While "[it] is difficult to stay open when what comes at you is an assault on your being," Butler writes, remaining open to being acted upon is the only way that we act, and the possibility or certainty of this assault is "the risk of remaining an impressionable and receptive being."[296]

Thus, Butler's account of agency relies on a broader conception of "ethical relationality" that views these relations as always potentially injurious and yet a necessary risk since they are also enabling. Since we are essentially dependent beings, relying on relations with others that we do not choose (or even know about) in order to survive, we also rely on these uncertain relations in order to *act*. A properly ethical disposition, for Butler then, is one that responds by affirming the existence of others, even those who violate or harm us, since we require these others as the ground for our own existence. Arendt already theorized the uncertainty of these relations as the "frailty" of action. Butler adds a thicker description by calling this frailty "vulnerability," or alternatively, "injurability," or "precariousness." So while Butler usefully develops Arendt's notion that action is both powerful and "frail" in its nonsovereignty, she does not yet fully "flesh out" its logic. The difficulty of this task is expected, since the history of philosophy has typically understood the agentic subject as *either* totally sovereign (free) or hopelessly powerless (determined), for Butler, acting beings operate with

[296] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 110.

tremendous ambiguity somewhere in between freedom and determination. How do ethical subjects, formed by involuntary and disciplinary relations of dependence, nevertheless act? How does an ethical solicitation become a political action? "What acts when I act?," but also: *how*?

My primary aim in this chapter will be to explore how Butler's theory of subject formation becomes the difficult but generative (non)grounds for understanding selfhood as dependent, nonsovereign, vulnerable, and *therefore* agentic – that is, how agency apparently makes use of an "unwilled susceptibility" that is embodied as an "impressionability" to the affects of others.[297] Having already discussed the possible role of the Will and having introduced the "crisis of agency" in chapter one, I tried to offer a deeper exploration of this "crisis" in chapter two. With Butler, I take a different tact by exploring agency in terms of "responsibility." That is, as a capacity to act elicited by an ethical encounter with alterity. Here, Butler is in conversation with thinkers like Nietzsche, Levinas, and Foucault. However, she goes beyond these interlocutors by elaborating an account of "vulnerability" that is, as Elsa Dorlin explains, "not just a question of thinking a simple relational subjectivity, nor is it a question of defining a condition of extreme fragility."[298] "Vulnerability," she continues, "is what refers back to a conception of subjectivity as socially constituted."[299] Vulnerability "allows us to think about the social meaning of what a person is" as unfree but not determined or powerless, and more importantly, to *politicize* it. Vulnerability does not suggest a dissolution of agency but attempts to locate it by identifying the political conditions that provoke resistance.

The ethics of responsibility—i.e., ethical agency—is Butler's attempt to explain that and how we are *moved to act*. But as I will argue, the agency that characterizes this response ethics does not explain how the capacity to act is *animated*. The turning between the ethical and political in Butler's

[297] Here, I'm thinking "impressionability" with Sara Ahmed. (*Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 2015)
[298] Dorlin, fn. 21.
[299] Dorlin, fn. 21.

work suggests that possessing the capacity to act and *being moved* to act represent distinct moments, despite Butler's own tendency to collapse them. In section four, I begin to explore the possibility that the affective dimensions of action account for the kind of animatedness that may be inherent in doing anything at all. I suggest in a preliminary manner that "being moved to act" is related to the tossing and turning of a particular emotion—the shame response. This is not to say that shame is the only emotion that moves us to act, but, as I will argue further in chapter four, shame is both exemplary and instructive for understanding the relation between emotion and action, and therefore warrants close attention.

I. Ethics of Responsibility

> "I cannot be who I am without drawing on the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me. In this sense, I am outside myself from the outset, and must be, in order to survive, and in order to enter into the realm of the possible."
>
> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

The ethics of responsibility developed in Judith Butler's 2004 book *Giving an Account of Oneself* implies a theory of self-formation and agency—that is, an account of the "agentic self"—that poses an important challenge for the account of action outlined so far. This is a theory that draws on the account of self-formation already present in her earlier work on gender, as the quote above indicates. Turning to agency, then, this too must depart from subject-centered modes of analysis that view it as self-contained, self-initiated, and self-sovereign. Butler, being engaged in the larger feminist and poststructuralist, as well as Arendtian, project of undoing sovereignty, therefore characterizes the boundaries of the embodied self as porous, vulnerable, and impressionable.

Given this account of the self's porousness, "what" is it exactly that "acts when 'I' act?" Is it possible to say? In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Butler addresses this issue in part through an exploration of "responsibility, asking: If I can't say "What acts when I act" (i.e., if one cannot be said to really "own" their own deeds), then how should I be held responsible for what "I" do? Butler's account, despite the unwill, unfreedom, and dependency at the heart of subjectivity, this does not eliminate the possibility of agency nor responsibility. Instead, it creates the very conditions for the possibility of responsible, agentic subjects. What agency means is thus refigured, becoming compatible with a non-sovereign account of action in concert. "Responsibility," meanwhile, represents an attempt to preserve an ethical core for that action.

In other words, I read Butler's question, "What acts when I act?", as an attempt to understand how the theory of subject formation bears on the problem of action. The result of this question, at least in Butler's work, has been the development of an ethics of responsibility that also describes the limits of individual power and agency. In this section, I will describe the ethics of responsibility and the version of the agentic self that it implies, before suggesting in later sections that this account falls short of fully explaining action.

The fact that "I" exist only by virtue of "you" suggests an alternative account of subject formation that troubles older philosophical accounts of action in difficult and important ways. For Butler *responsibility* is the result of thinking about what kind of ethics is possible if we accept the fact of interdependence, and to use this as a basis for understanding how it is possible to be an "I" at all. Once the narrating "I" is understood as constituted by and constituting a web of relations, common ways of conceptualizing responsibility become a site of confusion and anxiety: how can individuals be praised, blamed, and otherwise *held accountable* for their actions if we take seriously the fundamentally

contingent and unchosen nature of any individual's becoming who they are? How can "I" be made accountable for some act, good or bad, if I can't even give an account of myself?

As Butler herself puts the problem, the self "is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence."[300] She emphasizes that the damage we sustain in the midst of our relations—at the core of the precariousness of being in the world—is self-affirming and also undoing. This is how, in Butler's terms, being "undone" grounds the capacity *to do.* And further, how the conditions of that undoing are politically induced. If the conditions of my self-becoming are prior to choice or consent, and moreover that certain forms of dispossession are politically induced and therefore unevenly distributed, then wouldn't it seem that any account of responsibility—for who I am and what I do—is unfair? Since "taking responsibility" would entail (an impossible) "owning up" to the social conditions of my own dispossession, all "responsibility" suddenly seems incoherent.

But does Butler's premise that the subject is not self-grounding really "undermine the possibility of responsibility"? "If it is really true," she writes, "that we are, as it were, divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from the start, will it be impossible to ground a notion of personal or social responsibility?" Butler argues on the contrary that responsibility is not impossible under such circumstances. Her aim in *Giving an Account* is to show "how a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed, responsibility."[301] Critics of post-structuralism have argued that the dissolution of the subject inevitably leads to moral nihilism and even flirts with destroying the possibility of meaningful communication, but Butler's refiguring of subjectivity claims to avoid this trap by offering an ethics of responsibility that is not a casualty of uncertainty, but actually arises out of the primary unfreedom at the heart of our relations. "[What] we often consider to be ethical 'failure,'" she writes, "may well

[300] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 8.
[301] *Ibid.,* 19.

have an ethical valence and importance that has not been rightly adjudicated by those who too quickly equate poststructuralism with moral nihilism."[302] Indeed, while at first glance Butler's account of subject formation seems to render genuine ethical responsibility impossible, she argues that it merely requires a different approach; the problem of action—that without free will and rational autonomy, action would appear to come from nowhere—likewise requires a different approach. Before getting there, I will first elaborate how Butler reconceives responsibility outside a subject-centered paradigm.

For Butler, one's self-understanding cannot be fully account-able when part of what it must account for are the conditions, histories, norms, and infrastructures prior to us, underlying our origin(s) and constituting our formation(s). Consequently, she holds that we are not "responsible" for specific acts or events, since this would imply that one *could* know and own one's deeds. Ethical responsibility is precisely *not* accountability. "Accounting" suggests that I could clearly *count up* my bad deeds, calculate my debt, and own that debt like a credit score, an identity. But this would presume that either my deeds or my identity *are* either calculable or wholly my own, a possibility Butler denies on the grounds that we are constituted in and through our relations. A fundamental opacity is therefore built into one's relation with oneself and the content of this opacity are the relations between oneself and others, a complexity that is perhaps only partially recoverable, she says, via a social theory.

In order to understand this aspect of relationality, Butler first turns to Nietzsche, who, according to her, discovers the social relationality at the heart of self-formation. She contends that while "Nietzsche did well to understand that I begin my story of myself only in the face of a 'you' who asks me to give an account,"[303] and therefore acknowledges that the self is always relational, not self-grounding, he did not however "fully take into account the scene of address through which responsibility is queried and then either accepted or denied."[304] So although the Nietzschean account

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[302] *Ibid.,* 21.
[303] *Ibid.,* 11.
[304] *Ibid.,* 13.

of moral agency is significant because it begins to think through the conditions under which and the reasons why "we must become self-narrating beings"—*viz.* in response to the accusation of the other—the account of responsibility that emerges from this scene of address is ultimately a "revenge ethic" that limits his account of the "I" to a juridical framework of crime and punishment.

The Nietzschean ethic thus presumes an account of moral agency that relies on causal relations, according to which we can be held accountable for our actions. But for Butler, the accusation (i.e., of injury or suffering) is only one form of address. What Nietzsche fails to acknowledge is that the victim who accuses someone of transgression – prompting the transgressor to give an account of themselves (e.g. "Why did you do that?") – cannot simply seek to annihilate the perpetrator. "Revenge" does not take a good faith accounting of the victim's responsibility, only that of the perpetrator. A properly ethical approach, Butler thinks, is more sensitive to the fact that even the victim "is" only by virtue of the other and is also therefore "responsible." Nietzsche, unlike Levinas (who Butler will turn to next), does not adequately theorize this responsibility of the persecuted for the persecutor.

What Butler finds useful in a Levinasian ethics, I take it, is that there, the scene of address may take many forms. It is not only a scene of revenge—challenging the view that revenge is simply an automatic reaction and therefore a causal necessity, as well as a destructive cycle. For Levinas, "persecution" refers to our primary relation to the other. She clarifies that, although many are "alarmed" by this use of "persecution,"

> …what [Levinas] means by this is that we are not given any choice at the beginning about what will impress itself upon us, or about how that impression will be registered and translated. These are domains of radical impressionability and receptivity that are prior to all choice and deliberation. And they are not just characteristic of infancy or other primary philosophical forms of experience. They recur throughout life as part of a not fully articulate sensibility. But perhaps most importantly, this sensibility is neither mine nor yours. It is not a possession, but a way of being comported toward another, already in the hands of the other, and so a mode of dispossession. To refer to

> "sensibility" in this sense is to refer to a constitutive relation to a sensuous outside, one without which none of us can survive.[305]

By emphasizing that and how the injured party is also in an ethical relation to the other who causes injury—one that is unchosen and necessary—Butler employs an ethics that has the effect of freeing us from a certain Nietzschean circular logic of revenge (*resentiment*) and freeing us *for* a different understanding of agency rooted in ethical responsibility for preserving that impressionability. She writes that, "…although his words wound us here or, perhaps precisely because his words wound us here, we are responsible for him, even as the relation proves more painful in its nonreciprocity."[306] We are "answerable" to solicitations that we do not understand and do not, strictly speaking, deserve. The response that such an address elicits, I would also say, may be similarly inarticulate and ambiguous.

And yet, this account of agency as "responsiveness" or "responsibility for the other" is curious because it seems to operate in a purely passive mode. Responsibility is, for Butler and Levinas, precisely an ethical *response* to the address of the other, which seems to become more radically ethical to the extent that the address is a form of unwanted persecution. In *Giving an Account,* the ethical responsiveness of the subject arises out of a primary passivity in the "face" of the other, a face whose vulnerability *moves* the subject to respond. For this reason, according to Butler, ethical responsiveness is not possible where impressionability, susceptibility, and vulnerability are denied – a point that remains important as she transitions from the ethical account of *Giving an Account,* to the more emphatically political subject matter of *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* and *Senses of the Subject.*[307] The other is that unexpected, and frequently unwanted, figure who makes an ethical demand. This ethical demand is reflected in the face of the other and calls for an ethical response that precisely inaugurates our being as ethical creatures, as *responsible for* the other, and implies the "movement" of

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[305] Butler and Athanasiou, *The Dispossessed,* 95.
[306] Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2010), 47.
[307] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* 100.

action: "we do not simply move ourselves, but are ourselves moved by what is outside us, by others, but also by whatever 'outside' resides in us. For instance, we are moved by others in ways that disconcert, displace, and dispossess us; we sometimes no longer know precisely who we are or by what we are driven, after contact with some other or some other group, or as a result of someone else's actions."[308] Thus, we cannot fully understand ourselves or how we are moved, as Butler and Athanasiou write, "giving up on the notion that the self is the ground and cause of its own experience."[309]

While we are compelled by the address of the other (sometimes in the form of an injurious accusation) to give an account of ourselves as a narration of cause and effect, this effort is always frustrated by the primary relations through which the self is formed, and which "produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of ourselves"[310] that cannot be captured by an account of causality:

> When the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.[311]

The self that cannot fully account for its origins thus presents an epistemological problem about accountability that has clear ethical, as well as social and political implications. Butler's argument, in *Giving an Account of Oneself* and elsewhere, is that the various ways of posturing self-mastery today are not only false, but dangerous. Our "uneasy and promising" relations of dependency, she writes,

> cannot be easily denied, and if denial does prove possible, it comes at the cost of destroying a social and relational world. I would say that we must affirm the way we are already and still acted on in order to affirm ourselves, but self-affirmation means affirming the world without which the self would not be, and that means affirming what I could never choose, that is, what

[308] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 3-4.
[309] *Ibid.,* 3-4.
[310] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* 20.
[311] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* 8.

> happens to me without my willing that precipitates my sensing and knowing the world as I do.[312]

That we are "acted on" and impinged in ways we don't choose may constrain how it is possible to act in turn, but it is also the only means we possess. Again, the fundamental dependency that ensures we are *not* self-grounded is both injurious and enabling. For Butler, unlike Levinas, this also applies at the level of contingent social norms—and, of course, from her earliest work on gender, Butler has insisted that the norms and ideologies that structure subject formation both enable and constrain what it is possible to be and do.

By shifting focus away from theorists, for instance Kant, who offer ethical systems that assume a free and autonomous individual, and toward figures like Levinas and Foucault, Butler shows that the ethical sphere is dependent upon the social and political spheres that organize a particular scene of address in the first place.[313] For Butler, combining Foucault and Levinas, "the very being of the self is dependent, not just on the existence of the other in its singularity (as Levinas would have it), but also on the social dimension of normativity that governs the scene of recognition."[314] This means that the ethics of responsibility does not begin and end with the Levinasian encounter with the face of the other, but that we must also ask the question, in a Foucaultian critical mode: who can have a face?[315] The visual representation of personhood is not settled, but contested, and this contestation suggests a politics: "After all," she asks, "under what conditions do some individuals acquire a face, a legible and visible face, and others do not?"[316] In other places, for instance in the language of *Precarious Life,* Butler puts this question differently: Whose loss causes me to feel grief? Which lives are grievable?

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[312] Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 12.
[313] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* 2.
[314] *Ibid.,* 23.
[315] In the chapter "Responsibility" of *Giving an Account,* Butler precisely takes issue with Levinas's apparent inability to consider this question in relation to the Palestinians.
[316] *Ibid.,* 30.

If the ethical rests on the social, then social theories already present a way of departing from the autonomous individual as the epistemological point of reference and of moving instead to consider the social forms that develop via those relations. This reorientation to the self as a social and plural concept of subjectivity is necessary for understanding the account of ethical agency that Butler proposes. So although Butler ostensibly presents us with an ethical theory in *Giving an Account,* its political implications suggest that instrumentalist and strategic logics of action get called into question in favor of contingency and improvisation. Again, for Butler, we are never the sole author of our deeds in multiple senses: not only do I rely on others prior to me who furnish the world with the material to act and to narrate my acts, and not only do I rely on others with whom I act, but finally and first of all, *I rely on others in order to be an "I" at all.* For someone like Arendt, this third consideration is considered a prepolitical issue and bracketed, since a certain democratic equality is assumed. For Butler, however, the political dimensions of subjectivation are primary since they entail who matters according to an existing normative regime and thus who can be a political subject.

What would it mean to deny the fundamental sociability of action – the fact that we *depend* on others in various ways and at various levels in order to enjoy the capacity to act? What Butler calls "a war on the idea of interdependency" (in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly)* describes the ways in which neoliberal governmentality makes use of moral technologies that render individuals radically isolated and powerless, elevating world "disavowal" to world destruction. Importantly, this "world destruction" marches hand-in-hand with earth and species destruction, a reality that is no less important for our political theoretical concerns here than for environmental and animal rights advocates. We are not only bound to interdependency by the limits of self-narration, but by the limits of our earthly existence and by the necessary conditions for our survival—depending not only on the continued presence of materials that furnish and support our existence, but by the formative relations that make the world possible for us.

II. "Dispossession": Or, "acting from precarity"

> *"Lacking the conditions for action, we nevertheless act."*
>
> "We might say: the performative emerges precisely as the specific power of the precarious – unauthorized by existing legal regimes, abandoned by the law itself – to demand the end to their precarity."
>
> Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*[317]

For Butler, the existential condition of vulnerability constitutes an "unfreedom at the heart of our relations" because we cannot anticipate, choose, or control when the demands of others will strike us, whatever form they take. Further, how we receive and respond to these demands is only partly in our control. The promise and the risk, then, is that this demand will undo what we thought we were and prompt a different mode of engaging with the world. Therefore, writes Butler, "responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other."[318] In other words, the position of the agentic self is necessarily opposed to the cultivation of the will understood as mastery over one's circumstances and actions. Instead, it relies on the contingent arrival of an ethical demand in order to *be moved*. When a disposition to "be moved" is enacted, this is called "performativity," and the work of cultivating this disposition is politics.[319]

The fact that I depend on others in order to be an "I" at all grounds the ethical account of responsibility—of my primary obligation to respond to the solicitation of the other—and conceptualizes the subject as a social phenomenon that is, by virtue of this social underpinning, vulnerable *to* the whims of others and the changing configurations of common life. The death of a

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317 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 121.
318 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* 91.
319 Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 105.

loved one presents an occasion to recognize this vulnerability, and so does solitary confinement – both are events that precipitate the subject's "undoing," on Butler's account. As these examples demonstrate, there is an aspect of vulnerability that we all share by virtue of the fact that we are beings who depend on social and material infrastructures—a primary dependency that cannot be willed away if we are going to survive. We may not even become aware of this dependency until some part of what we rely on fails to be depend-able; i.e., if one is suddenly abandoned and left without the support that they previously took for granted. In these instances, one may sense that they are deeply changed as a result of some loss, especially if what is lost once played a central role in their experience.

The awareness of having been dependent, is also an awareness of a more general vulnerability that requires modes of interdependency in the first place. This vulnerability (or precariousness), Butler argues, is an existential condition that colors life indiscriminately. Meanwhile, there is another order of vulnerability that is unequally shared. The latter, she terms "precarity," or politically induced and differentially distributed forms of vulnerability. By "vulnerability," we shouldn't just understand "injurability," but a more general susceptibility or porousness that blurs the edges of both the body and self.

The co-authored 2015 book *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political,* attempts to distinguish between two forms of dispossession (another name Butler adopts for "vulnerability")—a "relational" form of dispossession and a "privative" form[320]—and to theorize their entanglement. This is significant because it suggests an outline for thinking the broader entanglement of the ethical and political domains hinted in Butler's work as a whole. I have been emphasizing the "relational" form of dispossession thus far. In this first sense,

> [We] are dispossessed of ourselves by virtue of some kind of contact with another, by virtue of being moved and even surprised or disconcerted by that encounter with alterity….These forms of experience call into question whether we are, as bounded and deliberate individuals, self-propelling and self-driven. Indeed, they suggest that we

[320] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 5.

> are moved by various forces that precede and exceed our deliberate and bounded selfhood. As such, we cannot understand ourselves without in some ways giving up on the notion that the self as the ground and cause of its own experience. A number of postulates follow: we can say that dispossession establishes the self as social, as passionate, that is, as driven by passions it cannot fully consciously ground or know, as dependent on environments and others who sustain and even motivate the life of the self itself.[321]

Our capacity for passionate attachments and drives is the condition and the result of "the displacement of the self-sufficient 'I' as a form of possession."[322] I can never own myself, since I owe my-self to others. To the extent that we are relational subjects, then, we are impassioned by a primary mode of dispossession. "The predicament of being moved by what one sees, feels, and comes to know is always one in which one finds oneself transported elsewhere, into another scene, or into a social world in which one is not the center. And this form of dispossession," Butler and Athanasiou continue, "is constituted as a form of responsiveness that gives rise to action and resistance, to appearing together with others, in an effort to demand the end of injustice." Relationality, for instance as the self-dispossession of an ethical solicitation, is the ground for "responsiveness." However, it also makes possible vulnerability—unequally distributed—to dispossession of another sort. "[In] the second sense," the authors write, "dispossession implies imposed injuries, painful interpellations, occlusions, and foreclosures, modes of subjugation that call to be addressed and redressed," for instance loss of land, citizenship, and other structures of safety and stability.[323] Importantly, "We can only be dispossessed because we are already dispossessed. Our interdependency establishes our vulnerability to social forms of deprivation."[324] In other words, dispossession of the "privative" sort supervenes on dispossession in its originary, relational form.

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[321] *Ibid.,* 3-4.
[322] *Ibid.,* 93.
[323] *Ibid.,* 2.
[324] *Ibid.,* 5.

Moreover, relational dispossession is a mode of "responsiveness"—i.e., the "responsiveness," or response-ability, entailed in the ethical encounter discussed earlier—that "gives rise to action and resistance, to appearing together with others, in an effort to demand the end of injustice" (quoted above). What this suggests is that "action in concert" might be thought of as the product of this dynamic between the relational and privative forms of dispossession, or, put differently, between precariousness and precarity. It also underlines what Butler elsewhere refers to as the "transitive" structure of relational agency wherein the capacity to act depends on an openness to being acted upon, to affecting and being affected, etc. The importance of this structure is already apparent in Butler's earlier gender theory, where subject formation entails a constant transitive movement between subjectivation and subjection.

While "precariousness" is an existential concept, "precarity" is material and unequally distributed. Butler, then, openly disputes (or rereads) Arendt's earlier claim that, "The only indispensable material factor in the generation of [political] power is the living together of people," insisting instead that "living together" still requires a material infrastructure. Even relatively immaterial modes of political action, like a spontaneous protest, requires a *space* for action – she reminds us that a politics that takes to the street still has minimal requirements, namely the existence of a street. In this way, Butler rethinks and redeploys an Arendtian theorization of the space for politics as a "space of appearance," a concept I return to in chapter four.

Unlike the spontaneous, *sui generis,* and immaterial nature of Arendt's "miracle" of action, Butler's formulation says that we "act from precarity," where precarity refers to a cluster of unevenly distributed material, physiological, and psycho-social conditions for action. Political action, according to Butler's discussion below, refers to how "performativity works within precarity and against its differential allocation":

> [P]erformativity [takes] place when the uncounted prove to be reflexive and start to count themselves, not only enumerating who they are, but "appearing" in some way,

> exercising in that way a "right" (extralegal to be sure) to existence. They start to matter. We can understand this more broadly as a way of producing a political subject, such that the subject is a political effect of this very exercise. The exercise of the right is something that happens within the context of precarity and takes form as precarious exercise that seeks to overcome its own precarity. And even if it is not supported by existing law (laws that deny citizenship, for instance), it is still supported by extralegal, cultural, political, and discursive conditions, translations from other struggles, and modes of organizing that are neither state-supported nor state-centered. In this way performativity works within precarity and against its differential allocation. Or, rather, performativity names that unauthorized exercise of a right to existence that propels the precarious into political life.[325]

The "performative in the political" is thus a way of acting on the self-constituting conditions of *dispossession;* that is, from the position of being outside oneself, or non-sovereign. A "precarious exercise that seeks to overcome its own precarity" can't but draw on relations of interdependence with others who are also dispossessed: "whatever 'agency' is possible and valuable is conditioned by an unchosen realm…"[326] Since the performative only works by invoking, citing, and finally, challenging existing norms and regulations, performative action makes use of the precarious and injurious in life for its transformative power. "[P]erformativity works within precarity and against its differential allocation." And in this way, "The performative emerges precisely as the specific power of the precarious…"[327]

Dispossession takes many different names and forms throughout Butler's work. It is a way of describing the subjection at the heart of subject formation and the unfreedom in agency, as we've seen, but it also a way of conceiving the body as a social phenomenon. Understood as a product of discourse, "bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves." This is what Butler argues in her earliest accounts of gender and of performativity,[328] where gendered embodiment is thought as an act that

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[325] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political,* 120.
[326] *Ibid.* 122.
[327] *Ibid.,* 121.
[328] "On Butler's account, 'precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us', we find opportunities to 'risk ourselves' in the creation of something new. Although she notes that such divergences or undoings can be both 'a primary necessity' and 'an anguish', she refuses to rest in any naturalism or mortalism, arguing that such moments of uncoupling also present 'a chance - to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession.' This move

refers to social meanings outside the body, challenging these social meanings by citing them in a slightly different or subversive manner.

However, if my body is not my own, this is not, or not only, because the body is a product of discourse, as Butler claims. Although Butler and Athanasiou attempt to emphasize how performativity is a struggle "within and against" normative *and* material matrices "that condition who can become a who in the domain of the livable," I also want to point out that the material dimensions of vulnerability operate at another level; how, for instance, the exposure and permeability of the physical body's boundaries create the conditions by which the outside (what is not "me") can get in and vice versa (via ingestion, infection, transmission, contagion, etc.). In other words, my body is not my own because I am not the origin nor the be all end all of what constitutes "me." And also, my body is not my own because my affects are not my own. Though I want to agree with Butler that "bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves"—namely the relations through which they are constituted and maintained—so much about the transmission of affect in particular cannot be reduced to discourse, but has an epistemological and moral significance that is pre-discursive and even pre-cognitive.

Butler does suggest some resources for thinking through the affective dimensions of ethical life. In 2015's *Senses of the Subject,* for instance, she situates this discussion within the phenomenological tradition, specifically the work of Merleau-Ponty. This approach has limits, however. Her all too brief accounts of "movement" and the transitive are suggestive, and I will return to these momentarily. However, the descriptive task of phenomenology does not adequately theorize what emotions *do.* Affect studies, while incorporating certain phenomenological methodologies, is better equipped to

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through action beyond the 'I' develops arguments present in Butler's earliest work in gender theory. While she proposes thinking of gender as a kind of act…[and] also emphasizes a need to think of what 'acts' in terms other than those of 'individual action.' The action that establishes and sustains gendered embodiment is always a 'public action' or an 'acting in concert.'….Butler refers to this process as 'a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure'…acting with others to do something with what has been done to you…" (Moya Lloyd ed., *Butler and Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 26)

explore the intensity or vitality that sustain the performance, that motivates the actors, and the ecstatic qualities of subjectivity and embodiment that move action. I argue that performative action is the scene where we see most clearly how affect provides the connective tissue between the ethical and political.

III. "Being moved" to act: From ethical solicitation to political action

> "How can it be that the subject taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency is at the same time the effect of subordination?"
>
> Judith Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*[329]

The absence of a sustained engagement with the role of emotion is conspicuous in a work like *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* a series of essays that tries to provide a general account of plural, performative action, but which curiously seems to lack an adequate theorization of how individuals are actually *moved* to act. Despite the connection between personhood and emotional response implied in a question like "What makes life grievable?", Butler does not adequately develop the affective dimensions of responsibility. The fact that grief attends losses that matter doesn't just show us something – that we are relational, dependent, and vulnerable beings – but it also *does* something. In other words, grief and other emotions are not merely pedagogical; they do not simply prompt or attend our ethical reflections. This example is instructive, because while grief is an emotion that figures prominently in several of Butler's works, especially *Precarious Life, Frames of War,* and *Undoing Gender,* these are precisely the texts where critics tend to locate the so-called "ethical turn." Grief clearly has an ethical valence then, but doesn't it also have a political one? Why is it that critics of Butler's work emphasize the ethical and disregard the political dimension? Butler has shown that

[329] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power,* 10.

grief reflects a political and moral organization—one that delineates which lives are grievable lives—but how does grief also enact and disrupt this organization?

In this section, I further explore how *being moved to act* becomes the central question posed by the ethico-political and how answering it requires additional resources provided by an affect theory. In my view, the obscurity at this intersection is limiting for Butler's overall political project and it is not resolved by simply running the two terms together with a hyphen and calling it the "ethico-political." Instead, we should ask: What does that hyphen represent? What is at issue here is not the apprehension of our ethical responsibility as relational beings, but the arousal of our capacities for *acting* responsibly — that is, of responding in a particular way. As I hinted in the previous chapter, work in contemporary affect theory suggests a compelling way to understand this problem, *viz.* in terms of (e)motion. Thus, I will argue that Butler's "turning" between the ethical and the political requires another turn — toward affect theory — if we are to understand how "being moved" moves. What does being responsible, in an ethical mode, *feel* like? And how might this feeling provide the motivation that explains political action?

Viewing political assemblies through the lens of performativity can help expose several important aspects of contemporary life: 1) the prevailing material and normative conditions that organize life; 2) what forms of life "matter" according to that organization; and 3) how struggles to identify and transform the conditions that make life livable for some and unlivable for others work. In other words, the theory of plural performative action in concert (à la Butler) provides a way to conceptualize what assemblies do: assemblies that struggle against existing conditions enact an ethico-political critique that also formulates a positive vision for a different world. Assemblies are a practice of world-building. This is why and how, according to Butler, assemblies that mobilize vulnerable bodies implicitly make their own demands without saying a word:

> My sense is that many of the public demonstrations we are seeing now are militating against induced conditions of precarity. And I think they pose the question how

> performativity operates as an enacted politics. Sometimes a performative politics seeks to bring a new situation into being, or to mobilize a certain set of effects, and this can happen through language or through other forms of media. But when bodies assemble without a clear set of demands, then we might conclude that the bodies are performing the demand to end conditions of induced precarity that are not livable. Such bodies both perform the conditions of life in public – sleeping and living there, taking care of the environment and each other – and exemplify relations of equality that are precisely those that are lacking in the economic and political domain. In addition, the demands cannot be articulated as a set of negotiable items, since the point of the demonstration is to draw attention to structural inequality and its increasingly dire formations.[330]

Butler's description of how "performativity operates as an enacted politics," as we can partly glean from the above, feels promising as well as frustrating. Promising, because by focusing on public assemblies, and therefore the uncoordinated and spontaneous political strategies of ordinary people, she implicitly suggests an account of action that is embodied, as well as oriented toward a recognition of the precarities of that embodiment. Frustrating, because Butler's examination of embodiment, precarity, and "acting from precarity" remains mostly superficial, teasing out (but really just teasing) a phenomenology that takes bodies seriously as a site of action without sufficiently developing the concrete, somatic references of that embodiment. Butler gestures toward a power inherent in assembly — one that arises between those who are otherwise powerless. "Sometimes," she writes, "it is not a question of first having power and then being able to act, sometimes it is a question of acting, and in the acting, laying claim to the power one requires. This is performativity as I understand it, and it is also a way of acting from and against precarity." The power she points to, I would argue, is *affective* as well as performative.[331]

Butler's claim that ethical agency makes use of a "prior transitivity" is an important one because it mirrors a structure common in affect theory; i.e., the dynamic of affecting and being affected that grounds the capacity to do anything at all. Thus, affect theories have given us some very good

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[330] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 102.

[331] This parallels my earlier claim about Arendt's action-theory, *viz.* that the "space of appearance," or the space where action happens, is a space of power and also intimacy.

tools—including this notion of a "prior transitivity"—to understand the experience of "being moved." Butler's discussion of "sensitivity" in *Senses of the Subject* is grasping at this movement. There, sensitivity refers to a responsiveness understood as the possibility of affecting and being affected by one's environment. From "addressing and being addressed" in *Giving an Account,* to "affecting and affected" in *Senses,* Butler uses the same formulation for action, writing, "it is only by being acted on that any of us come to act at all" (7-8). Just as the ethical structure calls on us—*moves* us—to act in a particular way, the argumentative structure moves through affect. The view that I will be elaborating in what follows is that there are important affective dimensions of the ethical encounter that will help to understand how an ethical solicitation becomes a political action. Certainly, the account of ethical agency as un-free and un-willing sits uncomfortably with familiar accounts of *political* agency, which tend to rely on opposing assumptions about free will and individual autonomy at the origin of action. Reading theorists of affect, like those in chapter two, my suggestion is that there are emotions that accompany bodily unwell — anger, shame, fatigue, grief — and that are necessary components for understanding how this action happens. In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Butler analyzes collective forms of direct action in an attempt to theorize the political as material and embodied practice. Thus, while Butler defines ethical agency (in *Giving an Account of Oneself* and elsewhere) in relation to conditions of susceptibility, vulnerability, and exposure, she de-ontologizes this thematization of agency in her description of political assembly. There, action unfolds in, through, and despite concrete, embodied experiences of un-well. The conceptual difficulty present in this transition brings us back to the "crisis of agency," i.e., that feelings of political un-well are figured in the ethical account as symptoms of un-will. In other words, how does one act under conditions that make action impossible and even unthinkable?

Although un-will is a generative concept for Butler's Levinas-inspired ethics of response, this account of subjectivity presents considerable difficulty for thinking about ourselves as political actors.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself,* action is figured as the response to an ethical demand—a solicitation by the Other, read in the face—and therefore, in that context agency is paradoxically not active, but passive, and first of all depends upon the subject's impressionability to the ethical solicitation. The idea that we "act from precarity" means that selfhood is not only fallible, unwilled, and opaque, but *compelled* by an opacity that it cannot fully account for (2003, 20). According to Butler, the "fact of our vulnerability" is what compels us to respond to an unwanted and unexpected address even as it "delimits our choices," already delineating the horizon of possible response. Despite the fact that "I can never explain who I am or how I came to act as I do," and I can't control or predict how my actions will unfold and enfold others. "Ethics," according to Butler, "requires that we risk ourselves in those moments of unclarity, where that which conditions us and that which lies before us diverge from each other" (2003, 144).

And yet, can "risk[ing] ourselves" — say, as courageous speech or civil disobedience or simply getting in the way — be a deliberate, intentional act on Butler's model? According to the ethics of responsibility, we "are moved to act" *by others.* That is, ethical agency does not originate with us — we are not self-moving — but *are moved* to act by the touch, the call, the gaze of the other, which, by relying on this "prior transitivity," dissolves a clear distinction between active and passive. To the extent that we say that the self *acts* on Butler's model, what compels the self is always something outside itself or the fact that the self *is* by definition—socio-ontologically speaking—beside itself from the beginning, situated in opacity and unknowingness.

While Butler contends that responsibility is an ethical relation that recognizes and demands a response to the vulnerability of the other, affect theorists have shown that displays of vulnerability illicit a *particular response*, namely the shame response. We recognize our "exposure to the vulnerability to the other *as* vulnerability" — that is, *in a mutual relation characterized by responsibility and felt as shame*. Reading Butler across her psychoanalytic, ethical, and phenomenological moments, it is possible to

discern a "turning" – an embodied movement – toward particular emotions that attend particular "turning points" in self formation. In this way, we encounter shame. The physiological and spatial dimensions of shame—as a turning in and away—bears on the very possibility of action in a unique manner: what we do with shame and what shame does to us marks opportunities for action as well as apathy, social belonging as well as abandonment. This structure is mirrored by the dynamic between subjection and subjectivation that Butler describes as the process of self-formation, i.e., the very dynamic of precarity and responsiveness that grounds the possibility for action in concert. "Is there a way to affirm complicity as the basis of political agency, yet insist that political agency may do more than reiterate the conditions of subordination?" [332] What could be closer to the feeling of subordination than shame, which, as Sandra Bartky puts it, "involves the distressed apprehension of oneself as a lesser creature"?[333] The performative, as Butler indicates, animates the critical space of difference in repeated instances of subordination. When we talk about being undone, for instance by conditions of subordination that differentially structure experience, "Are we talking about a loss that cannot be avowed, or are we talking about an excess that is itself a radicalization of the experience of loss, one that becomes a form of avowal, if not a labor of avowal?"[334]

Taking seriously Butler's claim that the subject is both the ground for a relational agency and the effect of subordination, we should also take seriously how subordination is experienced—that is, in terms of particular emotional states. As I will elaborate further in the following sections, shame is the emotion that attends subordination at the socio-ontological and political levels. For now, I want to briefly establish how the connection between responsibility/responsiveness and shame can be thought through Butler's readings of Levinas and Foucault. Later, I will specify how shame, as an

[332] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power,* 29-30.
[333] Sandra Bartky, "Shame and Gender," 87.
[334] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 28.

affective mode of response with ethical and political dimensions, matters for the larger constellation of questions around "action in concert" that I have been discussing thus far.

IV. The feeling of responsibility

> "What does it mean to require what breaks you?"[335]

The ethics of responsibility outlined in *Giving an Account of Oneself* presents a hard pill to swallow: by making this condition of impressionability the basis for responsibility, Butler implicitly ties responsibility to injury, and thus sanctions an ethical requirement that seems, for lack of a better word, unfair. Although precarity is later introduced as the concept that politicizes the unequal distribution of injury and injurability, these inequalities do not enter into the discussion of responsibility in Butler's ethics – "precarity" first appears in *Precarious Life* (2004) and then in later works. Because responsibility refers to ties that are pre-consensual (i.e., unexpected), those ties can't be wished away or denied by virtue of the fact that, for instance, I did not knowingly agree to them. Since no one is self-transparent with respect to the conditions of their formation, we never really know what we're getting ourselves into when we get into it with each other. And yet, in some sense we are responsible for injuries unknowingly inflicted on the basis of that opacity. Echoing Arendt's insights about the "frailty" of action, Butler insists that the unchosen, unexpected, and unpredictable ways in which actions typically unfold do not diminish responsibility.

The difficulties of this rethinking of responsibility are clarified to some extent if we reflect directly on the concept of forgiveness which appears at the very end of *Giving an Account of Oneself*, somewhat out of the blue, like a kind of deus ex machina. The anxious play of vulnerability and injury, risk and exposure, describes a tense, fraught, and painful situation that will just about convince any

[335] Butler, *Senses of the Subject,* 9-10.

reader to disavow human interaction entirely — if it weren't for the fact that these "impressions" are also a necessary condition for human existence. And this necessity is not only material and social, but emotional. Humans are animals that need to be touched, but touch might not be gentle or consensual. We also need to act, but we cannot anticipate how we will be acted *on*. We are acted on and act simultaneously, and we are responsible for others as we act through and despite our being acted on in ways that are injurious. But this doesn't mean that "agency"—the capacity to act—is the same for everyone.

But the fact that grief attends loss doesn't just show us something – that we are relational, dependent, and vulnerable beings – but it also *does* something. In other words, grief and other emotions are not merely pedagogical; they do not simply prompt or attend our ethical reflections, although that's certainly how Butler makes it seem when she describes the experience of being undone by the loss of a loved one. This example is instructive, because while grief is an emotion that figures prominently in several of Butler's works, especially *Precarious Life, Frames of War,* and *Undoing Gender,* these are precisely the texts where critics tend to locate the so-called "ethical turn." Grief clearly has an ethical valence then, but doesn't it also have a political one? Why is it that critics of Butler's work emphasize the ethical and disregard the political dimension? Butler has shown that grief reflects a political and moral organization—that delineates which lives are grievable lives—but how does grief also enact and disrupt this organization?

As Butler writes in *Precarious Life:*

> Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.[336]

[336] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 22.

A theory of political action suggests that there is the ethical matter of *being* implicated, but there's also the necessity of *feeling* implicated, and then implicating oneself. To put the point in another way: responsibility does not on its own explain assemblies. There is an element that exceeds responsibility which needs to be accounted for.

So, what does responsibility feel like? Reading Butler's ethics of responsibility in conversation with contemporary affect theories (some of these are outlined in the previous chapter) suggests that an ethical solicitation becomes a political action when responsibility is felt as shame. Consider again the role that vulnerability plays in Butler's larger project: cohabitation is necessary to every individual's survival (this dependency, she says, is greatest in infancy but never completely disappears despite neoliberal fantasies of self-sufficiency), but it involves the risk that others will hurt rather than help. Being human, Butler thinks, is a condition of being vulnerable and exposed—i.e., of being susceptible to injury and open to influence. As I showed in the previous section, this susceptibility, or impressionability, is the condition for "being moved," to responding, to being response-able. So our relations of interdependency, which are often passionate attachments to others, to social norms, and to material infrastructures, create the conditions for profound, life-giving vulnerabilities that are also an important source of shame. Having our vulnerabilities exposed often produces the shame response; so does witnessing the vulnerabilities of others, witnessing the other displaying shame about vulnerability makes one feel shame, seeing one's shame reflected in the shame of another makes one feel shame, etc. In other words, there is a close, constitutive dynamic connecting exposure, vulnerability, and shame. Just as vulnerability elicits the responsibility of the other, vulnerability also, at the same moment, and as a mark of that responsibility, elicits the shame response. If, for Butler, vulnerability is an unavoidable condition of social life, then so too is the experience of shame. And yet, shame seems to require interest – an ethical solicitation receives uptake as shame if and only if the solicitor is already an object of positive affective investment. In other words, I only feel shame about

things that I care about.[337] Earlier, Butler posed a question to Levinas: "[Under] what conditions do some individuals acquire a face, a legible and visible face, and others do not?"[338] We should extend this question by asking: "Whose face causes me to feel shame?"

The (properly) responsible one, then, is shame-faced. In the first place, what is useful about identifying shame as the emotion attending ethical responsibility is that the somatic registers of shame in the ethical encounter demystify by concretizing it, so that the Levinasian face of *Giving an Account,* in the blush of shame, becomes a particular person responding to particular vulnerabilities. Lauren Berlant makes a similar point in her book *Cruel Optimism,* when she insists that affect must be understood as embedded in the historical. She argues that the "Cinema of Precarity"—a "new realist" style of film originating in France in the 1990s that attempts to document the spread of conditions of precarity as *the* ordinary way of life—depicts bodily gesture and expression in relation to class politics as an "aesthetics of struggle." This, she says, "advises a different way of reading that de-ontologizes the face and embeds its stunned expressivity in a historical zone of circulation, affect management, and self-projection."[339] Understanding how affect is historically and culturally specific is also to "understand action that does not express internal states but measures a situation" and responds or adapts to an environment.[340] The "face," then, can refer an ontological concept (à la Levinas and Butler), but it can also refer to a specific, historically embedded expression, and further, this specificity should not be understood as that individual's internal state, but as a sensitive response to a worldly situation. Berlant and others suggest that we can trace the less than overt contours of a person's social location in a broader worldly situation by attending to "gestural economies that register norms of self-

[337] "When you lack what you do not want, there is no shame." Bartky, "Shame and Gender," 90.
[338] Butler, *Giving an Account,* 30.
[339] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 210-211.
[340] *Ibid.*, 198.

management": "The way the body slows down what's going down helps to clarify the relation of living on to ongoing crisis and loss."[341]

My suggestion is that the issue of motivation for action in particular, becomes more sensible just as it becomes more sensitive. We *feel* our responsibility as *shame* and relate to action via shame. And again, with Berlant, the relation between affect and action does not index to some internal state. I grant that, especially if one thinks through the broader lens of Butler's relational account of ethical agency, what we're feeling, why, and where those feelings arise will not be (most often) fully self-transparent. And yet if we understand shame as arising from assessments of failure, loss of dignity, and inadequacy—as Tomkins, Steinbock, Bartky, Ahmed, and others will argue—then it is possible to proceed like a "social theorist" (Butler), tracking how material conditions, infrastructures, and opportunities contribute to a broader social organization that defines failure in particular ways and differentially attributes failure to social groups, creating a social organization of shame as one of its results. We can use Butler's insights about dispossession—how the relational and privative forms of dispossession become entangled and how the privative form of dispossession (precarity) is unequally distributed—in order to better understand how emotions like shame that attend experiences of dispossession become likewise entangled and distributed, and finally, how shame matters for action.

As we've seen, "relational dispossession" is another way of naming the existential and ontological condition of vulnerability that Butler develops in earlier works and attributes primarily to her reading of Levinas. In this register, shame refers to some deep aspect of what it means (ontologically) to be the kind of being capable of feeling ashamed. In her article, "Shame and the Temporality of Social Life," Lisa Guenther provides a useful discussion of this ontological reading of shame through Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Simone de Beauvoir. For Sartre, she argues, shame is "the

[341] *Ibid.*, 5.

fundamental mood of intersubjectivity, just as anguish is the fundamental mood of freedom."[342] Sartre's is an ontological account of shame, Guenther argues, because it "attests to a dimension of my own existence that does not originate in self-consciousness, but in my exposure to Others" and speaks to "the structure of intersubjective *being* rather than to a particular configuration of historical social relations."[343] While the Sartrean account of shame points to an ontology of self-encumbrance, the Levinasian account sees shame as "a sign of ethical provocation by the Other." Like Butler's reading in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Guenther notes that "Levinas' challenge is to rethink responsibility unhinged from guilt, and even unhinged from action..." [344] Unlike Butler, however, Guenther emphasizes how Levinas' account of ethical shame is central to this project. She suggests that,

> In a sense, all of Levinas' work could be read as a sustained meditation on ethical shame, understood as a feeling of remorse and responsibility for the suffering of others, whether or not I have done anything personally to cause this suffering....In *Totality and Infinity,* shame no longer figures as a sign of ontological self-encumbrance but rather of ethical provocation by the Other. Ethical conscience is awakened in shame before an Other who is nakedly exposed to the violence of my own arbitrary, unjustified, and naively self-absorbed freedom. The Other awakens this conscience...[345]

Levinas shows, according to Guenther, how shame can "be transformed into responsibility rather than *ressentiment*," an opportunity for solidarity rather than domination.[346] As I have already drawn out, this is a goal that Butler's ethics of responsibility shares.

In this ethical register, however, shame remains "a general ontological predicament." [347] Responsibility detaches from guilt and action, but so does shame; ethical shame, according to Levinas, refers to what any just person feels at the existence of some crime somewhere in the world. The structure of shame describes how we are—each of us, regardless of social positioning—implicated in

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[342] Guenther, "Shame and the Temporality of Social Life." *Continental Philosophy Review* 44, (2011): 26.
[343] Guenther, 24.
[344] Guenther, 28.
[345] Guenther, 28-29.
[346] Guenther, 29.
[347] Guenther, 34.

the crimes of our fellows. It also means that we are indiscriminately called upon to respond. With Guenther, however, I would point out that this ontological account of shame does not reckon with the many ways in which shame is also a political provocation or how shame is politically organized, so that the burdens of enduring and responding to shame are differentially distributed.

The correlation that I wish to make between responsibility and shame draws on a political-ontological account that takes seriously both the ontological and the political account of shame, indeed seeing them as co-constituted. For instance, taking seriously what Arendt will refer to as shame at being (or by virtue of being) human in the context of unprecedented crimes against humanity, while at the same time attending to the more specific cases in which such a feeling arises, i.e., in particular individual experiences of proximity to shameworthy deeds and behaviors. This would preserve the idea that shame really is, with Levinas, an ethical provocation to rise to the occasion – to assume responsibility, actively, for a shared world replete with suffering. For Levinas, we are brought to conscience by shame. Indeed, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, the structure of shame—diremptive and self-revelatory—just is the structure of conscience made active. Shame is not just the structure of subjectivity as intersubjective, as Sartre would have it, but the structure of consciousness as such, a claim that rings true with the Arendtian insight that consciousness and conscience are really one in the same. The *feeling* of responsibility is a feeling of tension and tumult, of a conscience that won't quit. And unlike accountability, which corresponds with action and guilt, responsibility responds to the Other quite apart from any personal involvement in wrongdoing.

This ontological shame—like vulnerability, like dispossession, etc.—is not something we can will away. And we wouldn't want to. The ontological account of shame sees the necessity of what it risks for subject formation. Our capacities for shame are rooted in the constitutive relations of dependency that leave us vulnerable and responsible to the demands of others. Disavowing shame would require a disavowal of relationality as such, something that is impossible according to relational

theories like the ethics of responsibility. However, Butler identifies a troubling theme in contemporary morality: the neoliberalization of responsibility, or "responsibilization." According to Butler, writing in conversation with Foucault's late lectures, neoliberalism makes responsibility the concern of autonomous individuals who are forced to take responsibility for themselves under conditions of late capitalism, including the decimation of social services and infrastructures, that make "responsibility" increasingly impossible. One consequence of this, as Butler puts it, is that "the domain of morality absorbs and deflects the economic and political crisis,"[348] making failure to ascend to some level of individual self-entrepreneurship a specifically moral failure and therefore shame-worthy. Thus, there is a "slide between affective and moral economies" that is most clearly glimpsed in experiences of shame that respond to moralizing failures to cope with the demands of the market. Shame is therefore not only relevant for the process of self-formation, but it is also the "central affect of neoliberalism."[349] This latter aspect identifies how the failures that prompt shame are defined as such by today's market-driven economy, so that what is felt as an intimate, personal failure in fact represents a much larger regulating function that is economically and politically organized. In other words, the subjectivating function of shame is political. And further, this dynamic is only possible because "the self" is social and porous.

Echoing Lauren Berlant's claim that precarity is not merely a set of material conditions but an "affective atmosphere" and that "the precariat" is "a fundamentally affective class," I would argue that the affective dimensions of ethical and political agency can be studied in Butler's account of the transformation from responsibility to responsibilization. Moreover, again following Berlant, this is a transformation that is perhaps most visible in the "ordinary affective states" of precarious bodies.[350]

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[348] Butler and Athanasiou, *Dispossession,* 102.
[349] Luna Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), xiv.
[350] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 192-195.

In the introduction to *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Butler notes that one of the aims of her book is to resist the "discursive appropriation" of the terms "freedom" and "responsibility"—concepts that are central to her *relational* ethics—by "new versions of political and economic individualism." In a key passage, Butler explains why the neoliberal appropriation of ethical concepts such as these should be so troubling:

> [If], according to those who value the decimation of social services, we are each responsible only for ourselves, and certainly not for others, and if responsibility is first and foremost a responsibility to become economically self-sufficient under conditions that undermine all prospects of self-sufficiency, then we are confronted by a contradiction that can easily drive one mad: we are morally pushed to become precisely the kind of subjects who are structurally foreclosed from realizing that norm. Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level[...][351]

Responsibility's moral valence gives it a particularly strong pull on individual and collective psychic reality. Individual responsibility not only produces heightened anxiety around the idea of potential or actual precarity, but it actively erodes public services and public space by marking dependence on "publicness" morally and developmentally immature.

Butler seeks to challenge this understanding of "responsibility," I take it, by turning to the performative politics of assembly, which presents an image of action as interdependence and proximity that directly resists the individualism, isolation, and self-reliance modeled by our economic institutions: "Over and against an increasingly individualized sense of anxiety and failure, public assembly embodies the insight that this is a social condition both shared and unjust, and that assembly enacts a provisional and plural form of coexistence that constitutes a distinct ethical and social alternative to 'responsibilization.'" [352] The theory of action underlying Butler's argument is an Arendtian one, which affirms that we depend on plural others who constitute our capacities for action.

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[351] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* 14.
[352] *Ibid.,* 15.

As I argue in the previous chapter, this necessitates a renewed account of agency that gravitates toward a will that is not strictly individual nor free – an aim that Butler has been pursuing at least since *Giving an Account of Oneself*. The trick is to understand how our relations with others simultaneously enable and delimit our capacities to *do* anything at all. Neoliberal rationality denies the enabling dimensions of our constitutive relations of dependency. Instead, individuals are conceived as supremely capable in their autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency. This outlook involves moral, psychological, and spatial distancing between individuals that has important political consequences: it means that the psychosocial conditions necessary for the kind of robust political action that Arendt and others celebrate are being displaced by the privatizing trends of neoliberal rationality such that the very possibility of any action in concert is called into question. On some accounts of our neoliberal condition—Wendy Brown's account in *Undoing the Demos,* for instance—the reach of these trends is so encompassing that it is difficult to explain how collective modes of resistance manage to find a place in political life at all.[353]

Since we know that protest and other forms of political action nevertheless persist, Bonnie Honig asks, directly in response to Brown: How do neoliberalized subjects, then, acquire "the wherewithal to protest?" Given the crushing pace of life under neoliberalism and how this is paired with a moralizing denigration of interdependency as such, including those who rely on structures of interdependency—like public assistance or networks of familial support—in order to survive neoliberalism, it's no wonder that even the most economically and socially privileged among us feel the devitalizing effects of over-work related to maintaining neoliberal standards.[354] "People *are* worn

[353] See Honig on Brown's *Undoing the Demos* in Honig, *Public Things,* New York: Fordham University Press, 2017: 21: "Though she notes the various uprisings of 2012 and 2013, Brown does not account for them. How are these neoliberalized subjects acquiring the wherewithal to protest? Why do they risk what they have been taught to think of as their precious human capital?"

[354] See Derek Thompson, "Workism is Making Americans Miserable," *The Atlantic,* 24 February 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>

out by the activity of life-building, *especially* the poor and the nonnormative."[355] In a recently published viral essay, an educated, upper middle-class, white woman explains how millennials (like herself) have become "the burnout generation."[356] The author argues that...

So, if "burnout" refers to a chronic condition that results from continually pushing oneself past the point of exhaustion—that is, persisting beyond what one's available resources (mental, physical, material, emotional, etc.) can maintain—how do burnouts nevertheless manage to act? Arendt's answer, while avoiding the pessimism of Brown and others who are skeptical about the very possibility of genuine action, is deeply unsatisfying: recall that she accounts for the "infinite improbability" of action with the only slightly more optimistic claim that action always "appears in the guise of a miracle." Lacking a sensitivity to action's intersubjective and intercorporeal aspects, it is no wonder that any action at all would seem miraculous to Arendt, especially in the context of deepening economization of social life that leads to isolation and stratification. But there is more than one way of approaching this question: Honig (2017), for instance, focuses on how the "public things" that make up our common infrastructure provide the conditions, occasions, and common purpose for democratic action in concert in the midst of catastrophe, which often takes the form of protest against the privatization of these very "things." Like Honig, I think the question of social and material conditions for action is of primary importance—after all, if action refers to action in concert, individuals need places to gather and things to gather 'round.[357] How this gathering acquires something it did not already (individually) possess, i.e., "the wherewithal to protest," is a different question and it is not one only about the social and material conditions that preexist that protest. Here, the gap, or

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[355] Berlant, 44.

[356] Anne Helen Petersen, "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation," *Buzzfeed,* January 5, 2019. < https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work?origin=thum>

[357] Butler, for instance, argues that Arendt's account of action and the "space of appearance" requires a revision: "In some cases, the street cannot be taken for granted as the space of appearance, the Arendtian space of politics, since there is, as we know, a struggle to establish that very ground, or to take that ground back from police control." Or, as she also states, "sometimes the fight is for the platform itself..." Butler, *Notes,* 126-128.

paradox, points to a factor introduced by the act of gathering itself and that accounts for this "wherewithal," what Judith Butler refers to as "the performative in the political."[358] Tracing the connections between the performative and the political from Arendt,[359] through Butler, I focus on the affective and embodied dimensions of performativity emphasized in the work of Sara Ahmed (2015), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), and Lauren Berlant (2011), among others. "Action in concert," for me, implies a theory of the self that is moved to act in and through the affective dimensions of their constitutive relations. If this is right—i.e., that transformative political action depends on whether and how "we" are moved—then recognizing these dimensions and strengthening these relations is paramount.

A performative affect-theory, seen through the lens of neoliberalism, emphasizes even more the close connection that action has always had with one emotion in particular: shame. Shame is *the* emotion of neoliberal morality, but it is also the risk that attends any action at all. If shame is most often a response to failure and, more broadly, transgression, then it is an inevitable and implicit aspect of action understood as boundless, unpredictable, and interminable. As both Arendt and Butler affirm, we never really know what we're doing when we act and so we bear responsibility for that which we, strictly speaking, never chose.[360] The inherence of shame to action becomes glaring once these ordinary transgressions are absorbed by neoliberal morality: if we respond to some perceived failure with shame, then this experience is ubiquitous for neoliberalized subjects who are, by all accounts, always already doomed to fall short of neoliberal standards. Returning to Butler and "responsibilization": "The more one complies with the demand of 'responsibility' to become self-

[358] "[None] of us acts without the conditions to act, even though sometimes we must act to install and preserve those very conditions. The paradox is obvious, and yet what we can see when the precarious assemble is a form of action that demands the conditions for acting and living. What conditions such action?" Butler, *Notes,* 16.

[359] The performative aspect of Arendt's account of action is discussed in chapter one with reference to her discussion of the constituant/constitué in *On Revolution.* Linda Zerilli, for one, refers to this paradox of performativity, as it appears in Arendt, as the "abyss of freedom" (in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom,* 2005).

[360] This is why, on Arendt's political account, forgiveness and promising are necessary components of action, and why, on Butler's ethical account, responsibility is the name for agency.

reliant, the more socially isolated one becomes and the more precarious one feels; and the more supporting social structures fall away for 'economic' reasons, the more isolated one feels in one's sense of heightened anxiety and 'moral failure.'"[361] Neoliberal rationality preserves the myth that agency implies control; therefore, transgression is not an inevitable moment of action, but a *moral* failure that could have been prevented and therefore bears on the moral character of the agent. This means that the failure to meet the impossible demands of independence and self-sufficiency refers to a political and emotional infrastructure (according to which precarity and the failure that attends precarity are unevenly distributed)—i.e., neither ethical nor ontological—subtending subjective, "felt," experiences of moralizing shame.

This felt aspect, I would argue, is what spurs us to continually pursue these impossible standards and, ultimately, to unknowingly contribute to their reproduction via "burnout," [362] "workism,"[363] "resilience,"[364] "magic"[365] and, more broadly, "self-management."[366] Again, the magic here refers to a magical, mythical, or sometimes exceptional, ability of individuals to individually overcome conditions that structurally and systematically guarantee failure. And shame.

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[361] Butler, *Notes,* 15.
[362] See Anne Helen Petersen, "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation."
[363] Derek Thompson, "Workism is Making Americans Miserable."
[364] See Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: pop music, feminism, neoliberalism.*
[365] Here, I'm specifically referring to debates in black feminism related to the idea of "#BlackGirlMagic." See, for instance Linda Chavers, "Here's My Problem with #BlackGirlMagic," *Elle,* January 13, 2016. < https://www.elle.com/life-love/a33180/why-i-dont-love-blackgirlmagic/> and a response to Chavers's article published at *The Root:* Demetria Lucas D'Oyley, "Elle, You Just Don't Understand #BlackGirlMagic," *The Root,* January 14, 2016. <https://www.theroot.com/elle-you-just-don-t-understand-blackgirlmagic-1790853913>
[366] Lauren Berlant adds the important point that "norms of self-management" differ according to class, racial, sexual, and gendered factors. She writes, "What Jacques Rancière calls 'the distribution of the sensible' appears here not only in the class-based positioning of sensibility, but also in gestural economies that register norms of self-management that differ according to what kinds of confidence people have enjoyed about the entitlements of their social location. The way the body slows down what's going down helps to clarify the relation of living on to ongoing crisis and loss." Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 5.

Chapter Four: Shame and Performative Action

Introduction

In chapter three I tried to show, albeit in a preliminary manner, how the scene of address that compels action is not only marked by responsibility but is deeply imbued with shame. The existential and political vulnerabilities that characterize Judith Butler's account of the agentic self also provide for generative experiences of shame that have similar stakes when it comes to the process of self-formation and to our capacities for action. Moreover, the shame response is particularly relevant for understanding the hiding/protective impulse at the heart of embodied experiences of vulnerability and its exposure. Recalling Butler: "I" am subjected to the unchosen address of the other who, with a touch, a word, or a look, may be my undoing. This is an undoing that I seem to invite and require in order to be an "I" at all. If Butler is right in saying that we act from vulnerability, one way this happens is via the close, mutual constituting relationship between vulnerability and shame. Shame arises where vulnerability is exposed, and it is further compounded when a real or imaginary other witnesses my shame, since the postures and gestures of shame display vulnerability, which is itself shameworthy. In other words, shame communicates a lot even when it takes up postures of incommunication. Like Butler's description of vulnerability, shame is only ambiguously negative. It would be more accurate to say that shame is ambivalent, i.e., both constraining and enabling, painful and socially adaptive, etc. Reading shame into Butler's discussion of ethics, vulnerability, and performativity, I show how "responsiveness"—being moved to act—is mediated through a specifically affective response. Of the emotions, it is the ambivalence of the shame response, I argue, which is most instructive for understanding what moves us to act. While in the previous chapter I suggested that shame is important for action, this chapter tries to explain *how* this is the case.

Indeed, attending to the somatic and affective registers does more than merely add some richness to a description of the ethical encounter, it de-ontologizes it[367]: the Levinasian "face" (that Butler invokes in *Giving an Account of Oneself*) becomes a particular person eliciting and responding to particular vulnerabilities. In other words, how the face blushes and turns away, or how the gaze lowers and averts, suggests a different reading of these self-constituting encounters. This corporealization and concretization of responsibility is crucial, according to my argument, for understanding how affects like shame might account for the motivational deficit in action-theories, including Arendt and Butler's.

The phenomenologist Tony Steinbock claims that shame is *the* affect of the self. While shame "strikes deepest into the heart of man"—a claim I will examine in more detail below—this doesn't mean shame originates there. On my account, shame emerges in the play of vulnerabilities, corporeal and emotional, historically and politically sedimented, and how these arise and circulate *between* people. Thus, social emotions like shame challenge the outside/in and inside/out models that are popular in a variety of fields for understanding how emotion functions in general: that emotion is either something outside that gets in (e.g., according to some contagion models) or something inside that gets out (e.g., according to some cognitivist models).[368] While the postures of shame may at first glance imply an *a*sociality—someone who feels ashamed may appear self-enclosed, hermetic, and incommunicative—those theorists I discuss in this chapter note that shame also has an integrative, world-opening function.

For Silvan Tomkins, one of the main figures I examine, shame is the experience of coming up against a barrier to my communion with others. On this model, as a person's positive identifications

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[367] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 209.
[368] See Sara Ahmed's discussion in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.*

and affective attachments increase, the potential barriers to communion also increase, making them more vulnerable to shame, including "vicarious shame." Along with Tomkins, several theorists identify shame as the affect that only moderates whether one is included or excluded, seen or hidden, but it draws the social boundaries that separate inside from outside in the first place. When it comes to action, the crucial ambiguity—and transformative potential—in what shame does with us (separating, excluding, confining, hiding, isolating, etc.) involves what we do with shame. While the painful feeling of being set apart may convince me to sever other relational ties, proactively decreasing the potential for similar experiences in the future, it might also motivate me to overcome these barriers and enter into greater communion. In other words, shame's ambivalence creates competing impulses for isolation and communion. How this gets worked out is extremely important since on my account no action at all is possible in isolation. Since shame is a social emotion and powerfully contagious, how might these dynamics form not just the subject, but the assembly, and motivate/direct the acting of that assembly?

The account of political action that emerges out of a Butlerian encounter with Arendt stresses that nobody acts alone, and further that no *body* acts alone. This approach, understood as "action in concert," implies that our relations of interdependency are what ground the capacity to do anything at all – a fact that is borne out by contemporary politics in both big and small ways. But what happens when dependency is not viewed as a fact of life, but rather as a shameful deviation from norms of social independence and self-sufficiency? In order to take up the political power embedded in our relational ties, both Arendt and Butler argue that we must affirm the fundamental unknowingness and risk also bound up in the contingency of those relations. This means that we are responsible to others in ways that we cannot anticipate or will, let alone will away. And that responsibility, or non-sovereignty, is the only way of realizing agency. In my discussion of Butler's ethics in the previous chapter, I argued that insofar as "responsibility" names the movement of responding to some ethical

solicitation—i.e., ethical agency—this should be understood as an *embodied* movement and a *felt* response. Butler's recent work on political assembly, while it does not develop this affect-theoretical dimension explicitly, is compatible with an account like mine which does. Indeed, I will argue that Butler's performative action-theory is capacious enough to explain what emotions *do* (politically) since her account stresses the corporeal dimensions of both precarity and of political assemblies that emerge to protest conditions of precarity.

Of course, on my account, taking up responsibility for those relational ties that neoliberal processes of precaritization and responsibilization want to deny involves a willingness to bear shame. Shame bears a unique relation to action since it is primarily through shame that we are made to come to grips with what it means to be an acting being, that is, with the inevitability of our own limitations, missteps, and disappointments. If, for Arendt, forgiving and promising are the faculties associated with this human condition of frailty and futility, then shame is the fundamental mood that attends our involvement in these projects. Intrinsic to the recognition of one's "responsibility"—understood as the (sudden or creeping, clear or vague) sense that one is responsible for the world—really is an embodied *feeling* that singularly reflects what it means to be the kind of being that must act within a sea of contingency, with no guarantees, and without the power to control the course of the action they inaugurate or to predict its consequences. This futility doesn't call for despair. Instead, the characteristic ambivalence of shame means that it can stall *or* stir action: shame risks severing the social ties that ground action, but it may also establish a collective base/basis for political resistance and transformation.

In the first section of this chapter, I offer an example intended to further illuminate the connections between responsibility, shame, and action. In section two, I define shame for my account, especially how shame differs from closely related emotions like embarrassment, regret, and guilt. In

the chapter's remaining sections, I clarify *how* emotions—and specifically shame—matter for action. I argue that adopting a performative affect-theory of action helps us appreciate how emotion functions as a mode of "action in concert," not merely as a secondary quality, side-effect, or property of action. This argument draws on Butler's important interventions in her 2016 book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Unlike Butler, however, my account takes seriously theories of performativity emerging in affect studies, especially in the work of Sara Ahmed, Eve Sedgwick, and Lauren Berlant. These affect-theoretical approaches to performativity describe better that and how emotions constitute an important dimension of what we do together when we assemble.

I. Shame

> "How can loss of face be more intolerable than loss of life?"[369]

For scholars working on shame, there is a shared fascination about the peculiar power that experiences of shame have to overwhelm us: "How can loss of face be more intolerable than loss of life?" This question, posed by psychologist Silvan Tomkins, points to an important innovation in the philosophy and psychology of emotion, which identifies the affects, rather the drives, as the primary motivation system in human beings. Tomkins "discovers" the primacy of the affect system for motivation, and therefore uncovers something important about the relationship between affect and action. Of the seemingly infinite forms that this "co-assembly" may take—more and less complex forms that combine affects (primary) and drives (auxiliary)—Tomkins argues that shame is "exemplary."[370] Why

[369] Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader,* eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 136.
[370] Tomkins, 22.

is this the case? After briefly defining shame, I will provide an account of what shame *does,* and specifically what shame does to and for action.

I now want to engage in a general discussion about shame in order to show how it operates at the level of both subjective experience and structural reality. On the first point about subjective experience, I will spend some time specifying that and how shame differs from closely related emotions like embarrassment, regret, and guilt. Then, I will argue that shame is a pervasive feature of social life, i.e., a defining feature not merely of personal, but of interpersonal and intercorporeal experience. Because shame is a self-evaluative emotion that works on the subject by transforming the social space surrounding her, shame not only bears on subjective experience, but it bears on a meta-level concern about the formation of subjectivity itself (subjectivation) and on our very capacities for political action understood as plural, performative action-in-concert. Shame threatens to dangerously expand the spatial and social distances between us and thereby diminish our capacities for "action in concert"—after all, silence and isolation are two common ways that shame is experienced, and (not for nothing) two powerful impediments to collective forms of political action. Thus, shame not only has a devitalizing effect on our individual capacities to *do,* but it can dissolve the conditions for the possibility of *doing together* by compelling shamed subjects to turn inward and expand social distances. And yet, if social isolation were all that shame had to offer however, then why then would Marx write, as Tony Steinbock reminds us, that the "experience of shame is the beginning of a revolution"?[371] Exploring this ambivalent space between what is risked and what is made possible in experiences of shame, I turn primarily to Silvan Tomkins, for whom shame is "exemplary" because it is the negative affect that responds to anything impeding our most powerful motivational drive: the drive for communion. So while shame may respond to these impediments with further alienation and isolation, it may also provide the productive moment of self-criticism that motivates us to adapt to and

[371] Steinbock, 78.

overcome barriers, leading to deeper communion. This ambivalence—that mirrors, perhaps, the ambivalence that Levinas points to, between the desire to kill and the "thou shall not kill"—is what is at stake *in* the ethical encounter *for* the possibility of political action. If, as I have argued, the indispensable condition for the possibility of political action lies in the existence of others, our relations, with whom we act in concert, then shame is both promising and dangerous because it sits in decision over the capacity to act. If the danger of shame is that it threatens our relations to others, this is a threat not only to the very condition for our livelihood (as Butler has said, because we are dependent beings), but at the same time to the condition for politics.

As I explored in the previous chapter, there is an important "slide between affective and moral economies" that is often overlooked in discussions about shame so that pervasive feelings of shame are viewed as normal and appropriate, rather than as the politically induced effect/affect of structural inequality. The "slide" tracks how failure in the marketplace (which is structurally unavoidable) can be read as a moral failure resulting in shame – often resulting in a shame spiral since the physical symptoms of shame tend to exacerbate isolation behaviors that further entrench "failure."

At this point in my argument, I'm less concerned with whether shame is "positive" or "negative" as affect theorists use these terms, and indeed whether it should be considered an affect or an emotion and in what contexts. Instead, I want to begin by drawing out in more detail the unique psychosocial and physiological dimensions of the shame response with the aim of making three preliminary points: 1) shame is a constitutive feature of human social relations, and structures subjectivity as spatially embedded in those relations; 2) shame bears on the process of self-formation by drawing the boundaries that separate inside and outside (e.g., internalized sense of self and externalized conception of other) and the driving norms and conventions that animate self-

constitution and -revision; 3) and finally, shame is fundamentally ambivalent with respect to action such that it can either impede or spur the conditions and capacities for "action in concert."

Shame is not confined by a person's body and not limited to descriptions of their internal physical or emotional state. Shame is the experience of the dynamic between internal and external. It is an emotion that reveals how power and identity meet at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Shame is a social emotion (relying on relations of condemnation and social normativity) felt in a highly personal manner (as self-evaluation). It is self-revelatory, self-critical, and bears on the becoming of the self. Moreover, because the relation between being and action is so close in shame—so close that the distinct ontological and moral registers of shame often become confused, and shame itself is mistaken for distinct sensations like guilt—research on shame not only sheds light on the individual experience of shame, but on the social organization of shame. My interest, in part, involves how individuals might subvert and transform the reigning social organization of shame together. In *Touching Feeling,* Eve Sedgwick convincingly lays out how the at once highly contagious and highly individuating nature of shame makes it singularly relevant for politics. She writes:

> [I]n interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstructing and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects, is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment *by* someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me—assuming I'm a shame-prone person—with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable.[372]

While shame is typically considered a "negative emotion," there is an abundance of work in recent years that challenges the assumption that experiences of shame are therefore necessarily dis-enabling. When it comes to individuals, even traditional moral psychology has it that shame is just as often an

[372] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 37.

opportunity for self-revision and improvement as it is for depression and withdrawal. This approach to shame illuminates the relation between moral selfhood and action—understood as conduct—and conceives the experience of shame as individually determined. Even here, my account would draw attention to differences in subjective experience between episodic and long-term manifestations of emotions like shame. Fear provides a clear example of this: My subjective experience of fear might be episodic (a momentary fear that quickly dissipates once I realize that what I thought was a spider was actually a piece of lint) or long-term (an unfortunate early childhood experience involving spiders continues to produce a low-level, long-term fear such that every piece of lint looks like a spider).[373]

More importantly however, I do not think that shame can only be understood as a response to individual failure or wrongdoing—moral, political, social or otherwise—but it can be a pervasive attunement to the world as a function of one's *being* in it. Unlike many moral philosophers who view shame primarily as a response to "flawed agency"—how shame might arise as an individual's response to incidents of individual failure or wrongdoing that reflect on their character—my account also recognizes experiences of shame better understood as ontological or existential. I take seriously socio-ontological valences of shame that only make sense within the broader political, cultural, and historical dynamics and contexts of communal life (i.e., chronic shame about one's "being" – e.g., race, gender, and class-related shame – rather than one's conduct). Many thinkers draw a distinction in kind between shame about conduct and shame about being. While this might make sense, it is not always helpful. Maintaining a clear cut between shame about conduct and shame about being can obscure the slippages that occur between conduct and being when we judge others and ourselves – in such cases, judgments related to "one's" conduct might become naturalized assumptions about "their" being.[374]

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[373] Alison Jaggar draws this distinction between momentary and long-term emotions in Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," 161.

[374] Here I'm thinking about various ways of relating agency and stereotype, for instance when it comes to "stereotype threat" and "stereotype tax."

Examples of chronic shame tend to traffic between, and mutually reinforce, conceptions of "flawed agency" and "flawed being." It is important, for this reason, to hold any distinctions in view of their complex interaction. The more useful distinction in kind, I would argue, is between shame and guilt: with this distinction, we notice that although both shame and guilt are possible responses to one's conduct, only shame relates this judgment about conduct to a deeper evaluation of one's self. Shame, unlike guilt, bears on who "I" am and for this reason "momentary" shame is much less common than "long-term" or "chronic" shame. Guilt and shame, as we'll see, also have different spatial and temporal relations to action.

So, while shame may be experienced as an acute response to a distinct event or episode ("momentary" or "episodic shame"), "chronic" shame recognizes that what a particular sociocultural context deems shame-worthy is differentially allocated according to existing normative hierarchies. Since this shame reflects some aspect of social or cultural *structure,* it is likely to be experienced chronically as an aspect of one's social standing within that structure. In other words, members of marginalized or subordinated social groups are more prone to experiencing shame than others, and as a recurring feature of their lived experience.

Subtly distinct from this account of "chronic shame" is a variety of shame rooted not in "flawed agency," but what David Haekwon Kim calls "flawed being."[375] For Kim, "shame involves a painful apprehension of the self or its attributes as diminished, lowered, or lessened somehow, attended often by a hiding impulse. This lowered regard can result from noting that one has failed to live up to certain cherished ideals."[376] He goes on to argue that,

> The sense of diminution [involved in shame] need not even concern failure in the voluntaristic or accountability sense, whether in regard to ideals the agent explicitly sanctions or to ideals that constitute the imago. For it might be a result of coming into

[375] For the distinction between "flawed agency" and "flawed being" see David Haekwon Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation," *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race* ed. Emily S. Lee. Albany: State University of New York Press (2014): 116.
[376] David Haekwon Kim, 115.

> a world in which one is in some sense a failed or diminished subject well before arriving in it, precisely like the situation faced by the racially stigmatized. When this is the case, the lowered view of the self is not the result of considerations of flawed agency but of flawed being…Therefore, this sort of shame is not the result of failed agency but the inward resonance of a suppressive social order.[377]

How Kim means "agency" is difficult here, but we might say that while shame is not always an indication of "failed agency," it does call agency into question. If shame is a self-evaluative emotion that responds to failures to meet the requirements of social norms and conventions by physically reflecting one's diminished status, then we ought to take seriously the fact that social norms and conventions are never neutral with respect to race, gender, and other social markers. Shame, unlike guilt, is not necessarily linked with individual acts since, as Kim points out, some people (like the racially stigmatized) arrive in the world already in a relation to norms of shame-worthiness regardless of, and even contrary to, anything they might enact. In this case, shame is about one's very *being,* i.e. one's "status in the context of some social hierarchy" that precedes and constitutes that being.[378] Practically, different kinds of shame can overlap, becoming mutually reinforcing and even indistinguishable. A failure to act according to social norms can be understood as a more generalized failure to *be* (to meet normative social requirements for personhood) in that society. While moral emotions like shame can be useful to the extent that they help us to critically assess and refine how we act in the world—to become better versions of ourselves—it does not seem like ontological shame (shame about being) and other kinds of chronic shame should be viewed in this same positive light. For the racially stigmatized, for instance, shame can become a pervasive affective attunement to the world that is psychologically destructive and profoundly disempowering; that is, a world in which shame-worthiness is differentially allocated according to social standing in a hierarchical society.

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[377] *Ibid.,* 116.
[378] Dolezal, 7.

If Silvan Tomkins is correct that the shame response primarily arises from impediments to communion, barriers to enjoyment, failures of recognition and recognition of failures or transgression, then it makes sense that socially marginalized groups would experience shame more keenly and more often as an aspect of how living in a hierarchical society shapes their lived experience. While shame "is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul,"[379] this doesn't mean that the sources of shame are endogenous. Indeed, there are many instances where shame is attached to a "felt conception of being seen as shameful by others" according to (racist, sexist, homophobic) norms of what counts as shameful, and further that this "felt conception" can directly contradict one's own considered *self*-conception of not being shameful.[380] For many contemporary theorists of gender, sexuality, class, and race, this has become an important site of scholarship because of shame's role in identity formation, and thus it's importance for identity politics.[381] And meanwhile, the layers of complexity in the possible contradictions, contestations, and opacities (including self-opacity) of "feeling" shame is a place where Affect Theories like Tomkins's make a possibly unique contribution.[382]

Before expanding on the political dimensions of shame and its role in identity expression, we should establish that and how shame functions at the level of subject formation. As Eve Sedgwick notes, "In the developmental process, shame is now often considered the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop...the keystone affect...where the *question* of identity arises

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379 Tomkins, 133.

380 Alexis Shotwell, "Shame in Alterities: Adrian Piper, Intersubjectivities, and the Racial Formation of Identity." *The Shock of the Other: Situating Alterities* eds. Esther Peeren and Silke Horstkotte. Amsterdam: Brill (2007), 130.

381 See, for example, Fanon (1968), DuBois (1933), Harris-Perry (2011), Dolezal (2015), Sedgwick (2003), de Beauvoir (2011), Shotwell (2007), and Kim (2014).

382 Tomkins's theory does not primarily attempt to reduce or systematize the opacity and complexity of feeling and action, but to understand it. Sedgwick and Frank note that this approach is one way that Tomkins' account should be distinguished from other attempts to understand human behavior/experience: "Where cognitive psychology has tried to render the mind's processes transparent through and through from the point of view of cognition; where behaviorism has tried to do the same thing from the point of view of behavioral 'outcome'; where psychoanalysis has profited from the conceptual elegance of a single bar (repression) between a single continuous 'consciousness' and a single 'unconscious'; Tomkins's affect theory by contrast offers a wealth of sites of productive opacity." *Shame and Its Sisters,* 13.

most originarily and most relationally."[383] Indeed, there seems to be a strong consensus across multiple fields—from Tony Steinbock, in the phenomenological tradition, to Sartre and Beauvoir in the existentialist tradition, and to Sylvan Tomkins in psychology—that shame is a dynamic central to self-formation. These authors suggest that shame *makes identity,* and at the earliest possible stage in development. Moreover, we will see how shame makes identity precisely through interrupting identification.[384]

If we consider some aspects of Tomkins's phenomenological account of shame, we see that shame plays an important role in our relations with others as well as our own self-formation. Indeed, our early experiences of shame—necessarily social experiences—may be what first prompt us to construct our unique inner world and sense of self. The child, for instance, turns away from the stranger, hiding her face in shame; this response initiates, out of some external experience, a turn inward. Tomkins writes that,

> In contrast to all other affects, shame is an experience of the self by the self. At that moment when the self feels ashamed, it is felt as a sickness within the self. Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost. Why is shame so close to the experienced self? It is because the self lives in the face, and within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes. Shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness.[385]

The self here is corporeal as much as conscious, so that shame always involves the nervous system; it is often experienced as a physical sickness, and always as a physical response. "The self lives where it exposes itself," he writes, and it exposes itself most in the face. Again, an affect theoretical reading

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[383] Sedgwick goes on to write in more detail: "Recent work by theorists and psychologists of shame locates the protoform (eyes down, head averted) of this powerful affect – which appears in infants very early, between the third and seventh month of life, just after the infant has become able distinguish and recognize the face of its caregiver…" Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 36-37.
[384] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 37.
[385] Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters,* 136.

reveals how the Levinasian face might be de-ontologized without losing its central position for ethics: "having to face" or "losing face" does not just represent responsibility for this other or vulnerability to that other, but a mutual relation of shame. Moreover, the affective dynamics of this ethical encounter are revealed in the play of exposure and obscurity that marks a crucial ambivalence: shame is simultaneously an experience of self-exposure (particularly the exposure of the face), it is also "an act which reduced facial communication."[386] So even as shame may cause us to retreat inward, to close off communication with others, the blush of shame and the movements of the face when it is experiencing shame, still communicate quiet a lot, making us "unwittingly" *more* visible others than might be our intention.[387] In other words, the intercorporeal dimensions of shame is the first hint of its significance for the question of action, since shame appears to sever ties with the other, or risks that severing, even as it presupposes ties without which exposure would be meaningless.

For Tomkins, then, shame is the experience of the self by the self. It "strikes deepest into the heart of man" because when my faults are exposed to the gaze of my fellows, I experience the pain of being set apart from them through transgression and its consequent estrangements—self-imposed and/or other-imposed. Since, for Tomkins, the primary force driving psycho-social life is a desire for communion—to be in community—the shame affect emerges as most significant when it is an impediment to communion. To me there is a clear sense that despite—and perhaps *because*—of the fact that shame is considered the most self-related and self-referential of the emotions, it is also the emotion most informed by the tensions of communal and social life. Steinbock writes that shame, "must be understood as a *fundamental (political) experience of being human today,* and hence 'the most emotive tonality of subjectivity.'"[388] The idea that emotional life is both socially formed and socially formative is particularly clear in Steinbock's discussion of shame as an "interpersonal self-

[386] *Ibid.,* 134.
[387] *Ibid.,* 137.
[388] Steinbock, 71.

revelation."[389] He writes that "Shame calls me into question; it is not something that I will, and is in fact an experience I want to avoid. It holds me in check…[S]hame is expressive of a self-revelation, even though I am not in control of the way in which I am revealed to myself…"[390] According to Steinbock, shame is "a diremptive experience in which I am revealed to myself as exposed before another," and therefore the shame response already requires a social field.[391]

With this, we get a better sense of the potential dangers that shame poses for a democratic community, i.e., the risk that shame will increase the social-spatial isolation between citizens that is so undermining to community building, let alone transformative collective action.[392] As Lisa Guenther puts it, "The trouble with shame is that, when it really takes hold of me, I cannot even stand myself"[393]: "Deprived of supportive relationships to others, I am not merely left to my own devices as an individual, but I find my agency and integrity undermined by this exclusion. In this sense, shame attacks the very resources that one would need in order to resist shame, and to put in question the mechanisms that produce it and distribute it unevenly among subjects."[394] Studying shame, and how social groups are differentially afflicted with shame, is therefore also a way of tracking how the enabling conditions for action are likewise differentially distributed.

One way of understanding how shame matters for action involves recognizing its unique constituting *and* excluding function. This constitutive exclusion forms the social groups that make action possible at the same time that it creates an excluded population defined by a (shame-worthy) failure to meet that group's standards of inclusion. As philosophers interested in racial and gender

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389 Steinbock, 76.
390 Steinbock, 76.
391 Steinbock, 72.
392 Here though, someone like Tomkins would want to distinguish shame and disgust, where disgust is antidemocratic in that sense that it casts someone out without hope of return. Recall that for Arendt, "loneliness" (enforced, one might assume, by shame and other forms of social alienation) is the most dangerous and most prevalent attitude of political modernity.
393 Guenther, "Shame and the Temporality of Social Life," 24.
394 Guenther, 27.

dimensions of this problem have pointed out, standards for inclusion in social communities often pick out—explicitly or implicitly—deep cultural or biological aspects of identity, for instance skin color. David Haekwon Kim's account of shame thus distinguishes between two varieties of shameworthiness—one about conduct and one about identity or social group. The first he calls "flawed agency," related to a person's *conduct,* and "flawed being," related to, the "inward resonance of a suppressive social order." He writes,

> [Shame's] sense of diminution need not even concern failure in the voluntaristic or accountability sense, whether in regard to ideals the agent explicitly sanctions or to ideals that constitute the imago. For it might be a result of coming into a world in which one is in some sense a failed or diminished subject well before arriving in it, precisely like the situation faced by the racially stigmatized. When this is the case, the lowered view of the self is not the result of considerations of flawed agency but of flawed being. In the now familiar story, which has a variety of theoretical articulations, the agent internalizes demeaning images and messages in the course of learning social reality. Importantly, these images and messages do not simply float around in culture. They are politically organized..."

This reference to the political organization of shaming images and messages reminds us that a feeling is never *merely* a feeling. The belief that feelings are not *merely* feelings makes several revealing claims: a) it endorses a theory of emotion which says that emotions are not "dumb" feelings;[395] b) it proposes an epistemology that recognizes how emotions involve judgments and knowledge claims, and that they reveal something about worldly reality; c) it suggests a politics, according to which emotions reflect and enact a broader political organization; d) it implies a feminist and philosophy of race critique that challenges how the reason-emotion opposition is deployed to unfairly dismiss the political claims of oppressed groups, as well as the critical and analytical work that emotions do for those political claims.

Experiences of shame confirm a few important truths about the irreducibly social dimensions of subjectivity at this more ontological level. First, if what shame responds to is the condition of being

[395] See chapter two, sections one and two.

exposed to a real or imagined other, then experiencing shame establishes that others exist external to me and that their existence affects me. Indeed, shame confirms that others *matter* to me since, as a general rule, "'when you lack what you do not want, there is no shame.'"[396] Finally, as a constitutive feature of human relations, shame reveals the structure of human subjectivity as essentially *inter*subjective. This is what Sartre meant, for instance, when he referred to shame as the fundamental mood of intersubjectivity.[397] Meanwhile, Sedgwick and Frank note that not just philosophers, but many developmental psychologists as well, "consider shame the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop."[398] Phenomenological accounts also hint that shame creates such a "space" of the self: a person who feels shame typically experiences a strong impulse to hide—especially the face—and to turn inward and shrink away; the internal and external dynamics of the shame response suggest that in attempting to avoid the pain of vulnerability and exposure, the shamed person turns in and away from the gaze of others, using their body to create a physical barrier between themselves and others. This is how it happens that one ends up isolated, and however fleetingly, is made to be alone with one's self – "In contrast to all other affects, shame is the experience of the self by the self."[399] This *self*-consciousness, or consciousness of the self, *is* shame; exposure before others that prompts me to turn back on myself. And because, according to Tomkins, the desire for communion is such a strong motivator, shame itself, understood as the felt experience of a barrier to communion, becomes a central motive. In other words, the experience of shame can spur action aimed at overcoming this break in the community—such as self-transformation, self-improvement, or conciliatory behaviors—but shame also poses the risk that it may not be overcome, e.g., in spiraling shame or a total shame bind.

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[396] Spelman (quoting Arnold Isenberg), 230.
[397] Guenther, 26.
[398] Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," in *Shame and Its Sisters,* 6.
[399] Tomkins, 136.

Shame thus understood as the "structure of subjectivity,"[400] marks an individual embodied experience that nevertheless attests to the existence of certain dimensions within my very being that do not originate within me, but rather arise from the basic condition of being embedded in social life, i.e., that I am given to others as vulnerable and exposed. At the ontological and ethical levels, this does not yet or not only mean physical vulnerability and exposure, but something closer to what Sara Ahmed would call "impressionability." For theorists like Ahmed, as we saw in the more general discussion of chapter two, the existence of affect and the way that it travels between us attests to a fundamentally porous self and body, undermining liberal assumptions about sovereignty and self-containment. This view is compatible with broader trends in 20th century ethics—especially thinkers like Butler who are influenced by Emmanuel Levinas's ethical account of responsibility—that likewise views subjectivity, selfhood, and identity in terms of porosity rather than, say, essentialism, determinism, or stability over time. While shame also operates according to this background condition of porosity, shame "strikes deepest into the heart" precisely because it the affect that mediates the porous boundaries that outline the self, drawing the distinctions between inside and outside that mark others as strange or "not me."[401] Tomkins writes that,

> In contrast to all other affects, shame is an experience of the self by the self. At the moment when the self feels ashamed, it is felt as a sickness within the self. Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost. Why is shame so close to the experienced self? It is because the self lives in the face, and within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes. Shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to the most visible residence of self, increases its visibility, and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness.[402]

The "torment of self-consciousness" here refers to an aspect of shame that should be elaborated. While they will differ in their specific accounts, most affect theorists agree that experiences of shame

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[400] Anthony Steinbock notes that Giorgio Agamben also holds this view in relation to being and bare life. (Steinbock, 71)
[401] Tomkins, 22.
[402] Tomkins, 136.

depend first of all on the existence of a prior, positive affective relation to or identification with some object. In other words, only persons/things that I care about—that *matter* to me—can be a source of shame: "Without positive affect, there can be no shame: only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush."[403] If our relations, attachments, and identifications make us who we are at this deep level, then impediments to those aspects of our self-consciousness can cause torment—or at least profound tension.

Philosopher Tony Steinbock's account of shame makes much of this tension, since for him, shame is a uniquely diremptive experience; i.e., an experience that splits or forces apart. For Steinbock, shame presupposes a positive sense of self-givenness[404] as well as a conflicting self that is revealed by my exposure before others. The "diremptive" moment characteristic of shame happens when the positive valuation of myself is spontaneously called into question—brought up short, interrupted, challenged—by an act or event that reveals me to myself anew by virtue of being exposed before another. According to Steinbock, shame is an interpersonal emotion that, by virtue of that interpersonal dimension, always arises spontaneously, against my will, and even against my liking. As he continually reiterates, however, this does mean that there isn't a "core of personal creativity" in shame.[405] The tension that arises in and through this diremptive experience creates an opportunity for both agency and creativity. While I am not in control of how I am revealed to myself by another, shame is "a unique way (one among other creative responses) of living this tension such that it can evoke a reorientation."[406] Shame compels us to limit that tension, i.e., to bring oneself closer in line with one's self-conception. "The creative personal dimension of shame as self-revelatory enables shame to have a critical dimension; it can modify how I understand myself and how I am to be." Thus,

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[403] Tomkins, 22.
[404] Steinbock, 77.
[405] Steinbock, 76.
[406] Steinbock, 73.

shame "bears on the becoming of the self" in part by acknowledging that I am not self-grounding, but involved in an ongoing interpersonal process of self-critique and revision. Since self-becoming is a social process, social norms and conventions are inevitably involved in constituting the objects, subjects, and occasions for shame. One's positive self-valuation is situated in a particular socio-historical context that shapes the contours of the self as given (rather than self-grounding), as well as the standards for success or failure relative to that self-valuation.

Shame, in my view, matters so deeply for action in part because of the opportunity that this tension, or "diremption," opens up for being and acting otherwise. Shame *qua* self-consciousness might operate in these instances like a voice of *conscience* (and we could return to Arendt's claim that conscience and consciousness are two words that describe the same mental phenomenon) that interrupts an ongoing orientation to the world by rendering my physical and spatial bearing suddenly uncomfortable, begging my conscious attention. When this embodied dimension receives uptake, it can provide a powerful impetus for action.

What happens, however, when shame does not receive uptake?

We have all been amazed at someone who demonstrates no sense of shame about some objectively shame-worthy (non-normative or socially unacceptable) behavior or have ourselves felt no shame despite the attempts of others to shame us or in the face of norms, histories, and structures that expect a certain shame-proneness. Indeed, as Andrea Warmack argued in her essay "Flamboyantly Living the Fuck You: Towards Shamelessness as a Virtue,"[407] sometimes resistance happens when those who are supposedly "prone" to shame according to racist, sexist, and other norms, respond with *shamelessness.* Shamelessness, for Warmack, denotes when I *should* feel shame, but deliberately do not. This subversive refusal of shame, she argues, comes from a practice of self-love. I understand this

[407] Andrea Warmack in a 2018 presentation at the Friday Philosophy Forum, Emory University,

move as a recommitment to a loving *self*-conception/perception—and the values, norms, and conventions that that entails—and a refusal of the other's conception of my-self within the frame of a broader worldview characterized by hierarchy and injustice. In other words, while it is up for debate whether one could *deliberately* choose not to feel shame—since our affective responses are often pre-reflective—we can certainly, reflectively and deliberately, refuse to endorse a system of values built on hierarchy and injustice that regulate shame and other feelings. Similarly, the social theory of selfhood I have been discussing limits but does not foreclose our agency with respect to self-formation.

Michael Chiddo's essay "Silence in the Night" explores how shame plays a constitutive role in becoming masculine under conditions of toxic, patriarchal masculinity. Chiddo cites the philosopher Bonnie Mann, who writes that, "Sovereign masculinity is…characterized by a denial of both physical and intersubjective vulnerability…Shame always accompanies sovereign masculinity because it plays a central part in its production."[408] Chiddo argues that shame has painful and violent consequences for all genders, pointing out that, especially in adolescence, boys are made masculine and patriarchal through the shame inflicted by their peers. And yet, because shame implies vulnerability, masculine subjects (pro)actively avoid consciously taking up shame that may expose their vulnerabilities – which are tacitly understood to reveal their weakness and femininity. "The scripts of patriarchal masculinity," Chiddo writes, "entail an ability to survive shame through reactions that convert it into displays of power."[409] Mann calls these "shame-reactions": when the shamed one coverts their shame into some other emotion, in this case, rage, hostility, contempt, and/or aggression.[410] This analysis of shame, I would argue, does not suggest that all shame is socially toxic, as Chiddo seems to suggest. Instead, what it observes is that shame *becomes* destructive when it is not properly taken up, understood, and

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[408] Bonnie Mann, *Sovereign Masculinities: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 109.
[409] Michael Chiddo in "Silence in the Night: Male Experience and Patriarchal Masculinities Scripts of Shame," an unpublished essay provided by Chiddo and used with permission.
[410] Mann, 116.

worked through, i.e., when shame is bypassed and converted into so-called "shame-reactions" like rage. Again, what this tells us is that shame is so painful and uncomfortable that we are willing to trade it for almost any other emotion and even death. Thus, when one's shame does not receive uptake, they might avoid a pain, but they will likely also inflict a harm.

One kind of harm that avoiding shame might inflict, this time through the lens of white femininity and feminisms, happens when shame is ignored or deflected and called "innocence." Elizabeth Spelman's early essay on shame, "The Feeling of Virtue and the Virtue of Feeling," draws out a description of this kind of harm and also distinguishes between its permutations in concepts like embarrassment, regret, and guilt.[411] Spelman makes the point that there is a danger when "feelings" are unreflectively celebrated by feminists as part of a broader revaluation of traditionally denigrated "feminine virtues," including emotions and emotionality. She argues, for instance, that feminist ethicists who celebrate "care" need to also acknowledge how care is differentially allocated between women. Equally important, Spelman argues, is *how* feminists ought to acknowledge this history: a feminist ethical and political revaluation of emotion needs to take *shame* seriously – specifically the shame of what women have done to other women, e.g., what white women have done to poor women and women of color. Exposing these histories of injustice and inequality *between* women is only part of Spelman's aim. Further, she argues that these histories of oppression and domination *of* women *by* women require a practice of reparative justice rooted in shame, rather than in emotions that are less morally potent (and personally transformative), like regret or guilt. Moreover, I read Spelman's argument as an intervention into feminist accounts of women's experience that foreground certain kinds of shame and ignore others. For instance, feminist theories of shame might foreground the

[411] While Spelman's treatment of shame makes the important point that shame requires a positive affective investment in or appraisal of something (i.e., oneself) in order to feel shame, her account of the self does not do enough to parse how my self-conception is to a significant extent out of my hands and how what is considered "shameworthy" is likewise socially constituted.

socio-ontological shame that colors the experience of women in patriarchal society, without exploring how this description does or does not account for the particular experiences of non-white women in a racist patriarchal society, and while ignoring the shame-worthiness of being white in a white supremacist society.

Similarly, when it comes to episodic shame, or shame about conduct, it is common (because easier) to acknowledge the shame of what has been done to me, and not shame about what I, as a woman, have done to other women not like me. Notice how, in both cases—shame about being and shame about conduct—shame emphasizes "woman" as passive or non-agential. Not only does this assume a universal category "woman," but it reinforces the assumption that "being" a woman by definition means lacking agency. These feminist accounts of "the second sex" follow those, like Simone de Beauvoir, who see the situation of women as consisting in a fundamental frustration of transcendence. On this account, shame is an active mode of disclosing oneself as fundamentally diminished. What this incomplete picture of shame about being obscures however, according to Spelman, is the recognition of wrongdoing and wrong-being, and even the capacity for wrongdoing since "being" is defined as non-agential.

Elisabeth Anker's account of "felt legitimacy" is useful here, though it comes out of the different but not too distant context of examining the political work of emotion in the War on Terror. Like Spelman, Anker questions the "virtue of feeling," especially as that virtue becomes a legitimating force, pre-emptively legitimating the use of force and other modes of action in response to a real or perceived injury. Anker's example is, of course, the 9-11 attacks. The "feeling of suffering from terrorism," in that case, offers a feeling of virtue that pre-emptively legitimates any action deemed necessary to "banish" terrorism.[412]

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[412] Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), 132-133.

Instead of connecting passivity with innocence that disowns agency, we might take up Butler's account of responsibility, which says that ethical action is about "doing something with what has been done to you." In my view, "responsibility" of this sort need not end up in a version of "resiliency discourse" – a set of norms that values individuals who heroically overcome a set of injuries or obstacles, thereby reinvesting in the very system (neoliberalism) which causes injury.[413] As we have seen, this can't be what Butler's response ethics would imply, since part of the work of that account is to trace the meaning of "responsibility" from its ethical valence—i.e., the ability to respond to the needs of the other—to the moralizing valence of "responsibilization" modeled by contemporary market interactions. Alongside this transformation, we can perhaps trace corresponding practices in how shame is experienced and deployed.

The first thing to notice with respect to how shame is deployed, is that it is often wrongly deployed, or, as I argued earlier, deflected and transformed into related emotions. Therefore, distinguishing shame from related emotions is essential. Spelman's essay on shame provides a useful taxonomy for parsing these distinctions that is worth examining at length.

In the essay, Spelman focuses the harms that women have caused other women, specifically, what white women have done and continue to do to black women that cause harms. The question she poses is what kind of emotional expression appropriately (that is, justly) responds to this harm. In her discussion of this history of interracial violation of black women by white women in the United States, beginning in slavery, Spelman argues that *the recognition of a shameful history as shameful and shame-worthy performs a kind of social justice that other modes of recognition do not.* She argues that in order to develop an ethics of care meaningfully grounded in justice we must also attend to the lack of care that women have shown other women. Carefully parsing the distinctions between regret, embarrassment, guilt, and shame, Spelman concludes that for white women to genuinely confront this lack of care—this history

[413] See Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: pop music, feminism, neoliberalism* (London: Zone Books, 2015).

of what women have done to other women—with anything other than shame is an injustice. Below is a paraphrase of the taxonomy Spelman gives in "The Feeling of Virtue and the Virtue of Feeling":

> *Regret:* Expressing regret acknowledges that a state of affairs is somehow undesirable. E.g., like the passing of summer: while I may consider it a bummer, I don't believe that it should not have happened.
>
> *Embarrassment:* Embarrassment adds to regret the dimension of exposure to judgment. A man may be embarrassed that he beats his wife, but not because he believes it's wrong. What is troubling is exposure of the behavior, not the behavior itself.
>
> *Guilt:* With guilt, I am judging myself adversely, but my situation is not hopeless – I am not less of a person than I thought I was. I simply did something I think I shouldn't have done or failed to do something I think I ought to have done. I can repair the damage I've done by acting, and the goal of that action is to restore the blot-free picture of myself. With guilt the concern is more about myself – my status in my own eyes – rather than who I have wronged. This affirms that nothing is basically wrong with me. What is wrong is my action.
>
> *Shame:* With shame, I feel I am not the person I thought I was or hoped I would be. The self is viewed as all too compatible with the thing that I did. So if a man is *ashamed* of beating his wife, he must believe that this action is revelatory of the person he in fact is even though he had thought or hoped that he was someone else, someone better than he turns out to be.[414]

Since the most confusion usually exists between "guilt" and "shame," I will draw out a bit more why Spelman argues that only shame is an expression of justice. While expressions from "white guilt," for instance, imply that "it is possible for me to think of a part of myself as not living up to what the rest of me stands for," this encourages false assumptions about how whiteness, as a constitutive dimension of experience, actually functions. On the contrary, Spelman writes that "Seeing myself as deeply disfigured by privilege and desiring to do something about it may be impossible without my feeling shame. The degree to which I am moved to undermine systems of privilege is closely tied to the degree to which I feel shame at the sort of person such privilege makes me or allows me to be."

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[414] Elizabeth Spelman, "The Feeling of Virtue and the Virtue of Feeling" in *Feminist Ethics,* ed. Claudia Card. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, (1991): 213-232.

Assuming that shame is the appropriate response to deeply felt barriers to communion and that it is consciously felt, it also seems like there are better and worse ways to take up shame. Recall that according to the phenomenological descriptions of shame (which are many and different, but agree on some general points), shame produces profound barriers to intimacy and communion: reducing facial communication by lowering the eyes and averting the gaze, turning away, covering the face, even hiding. If loss of face can be more intolerable than loss of life, then for the shamed person who will do almost anything to avoid exposing their face, complete social isolation is hardly unheard of. The problem with this, as Lisa Guenther explains, is that,

> Deprived of supportive relationships to others, I am not merely left to my own devices as an individual, but I find my agency and integrity undermined by this exclusion. In this sense, shame attacks the very resources that one would need in order to resist shame, and to put in question the mechanisms that produce it and distribute it unevenly among subjects. The trouble with shame is that, when it really takes hold of me, I cannot even stand myself...[415]

For social and political theories like the account of action I have been elaborating, shame represents a deep problem, especially when it becomes a structure- or system-organizing principle. Specifically, as Guenther argues, shame directly attacks action's *resources,* since when it comes to "action in concert," those resources just are our relations. In other words, shame is the threat of social isolation and impotence.

But as Butler has already noted in relation to grief, the expectation that shame should always imply alienation and isolation, is often false. As she writes in *Precarious Life:*

> Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.[416]

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[415] Guenther, 24.
[416] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 22.

The forms of sovereign individualism that Butler opposes exactly deny, implicitly or explicitly, the idea that individuals are radically dependent in ways that, from the first moment, constitute them *as* individual subjects with various capacities. So the corresponding significance of *grief* that attends these losses should not therefore be restricted to a strict politics of mourning and lamentation that is solely *privatizing* (as Bonnie Honig argues in *Antigone, Interrupted*), but perhaps more so as evidence of an emotional field that is relevantly political because it opens up struggles over recognition and inclusion, and discloses the connectedness at stake in those moments. In other words, grievability marks subject-ability (and response-ability). Just as loss prompts a line of inquiry—"Who 'am' I, without you?"—that reveals us to ourselves as dependent on our relations with others, the shame response relies on prior positive attachments that form the joy of communion, the loss of which makes the pain of shame possible. Like grief, shame appears to be a "privatizing" and purely self-related experience, but once we examine the movement of shame more closely, it's clear that it shares with grief a politicizing and integrative function. And yet shame is even more peculiar than grief, I would argue, because it is a more deeply ambivalent emotional experience.

Shame's characteristic ambivalence is related to regimes of affection and disaffection that are often organized by remembrance and forgetting. Disaffection, or cases where shame doesn't "bear" on the subject in relation to an object, might be because, as Tomkins's model suggests, the subject did not previously link that object to a positive affect (which is then frustrated and produces shame). So when the possibility of shame is absent in our relations with others, it can be an important symptom that something else is absent, viz. recognition and respect. In shame's threat of solipsism, the problem is not that shame is already a form of moral narcissism, but that it threatens to become moral narcissism. A threat which, it is easy to see, is enhanced by certain social and political forms, for instance neoliberal governmentality. And yet, although shame is intimately self-related, the self in question is not a self-transparent or self-grounding self. The complexity that forms Butler's account

of relational ethics as a theory of subject formation, at the same time that it obscures how political action arises, potentially expands the field of objects that might cause us to feel shame as "vicarious shame." [417] Again, emotions like shame, including grief (the emotion that Butler directly acknowledges), are not necessarily privatizing even while they are self-related. The ambivalence, and indeed the promise, of these self-related emotions is that they can also function as world-disclosing, revealing that the self was really a relation all along. The concept of vicarious shame allows one to understand how they can feel shame on account of something that they have not directly caused, even did not exist to cause, including shame as inheritance of past wrongs perpetrated by one's "relations," which are formative and constantly reformulated. Forgetting, and the disaffection it involves, operates to deny or disavow certain kinds of inherited shame. So it's not only the case that attending to emotion is crucial for understanding how action happens, but that attending to responsibility on Butler's ethical account is crucial for understanding vicarious shame. In other words, Butler's notion of responsibility, accounts for how shame might motivate me to act on this basis as well as on the basis of what I never consented to but must be responsible for.

II. The feeling of responsibility, revisited

According to the action-theory I have been developing, part of what living within a complex web of social relations means is that we never fully know what we're doing when we act. Action's unavoidable contingency and unpredictability make our best intentions uncertain and even futile. Failure, transgression, deviance, and injury are not just possible, but guaranteed, since my agency is not quite my own. If shame, as many philosophers of emotion argue, arises primarily as a painful recognition

[417] Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters,* 162.

of some failure or transgression—some barrier to communion—then the only way to avoid shame is never to act at all. And yet, *not* acting means disavowing the ethical ties we share with others and denying our responsibility for them. Shame, according to my account, is thus an unavoidable dimension of the experience of being and acting in the world with others.

Butler's work develops a "social ontology" compatible with the view that shame is a constitutive dynamic in the process of self-formation – recall Sedgwick's analysis of shame as "the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop...the keystone affect...where the *question* of identity arises most originarily and most relationally."[418] So while the possibility of avoiding shame is a fantasy, Butler's ethics shows that this recognition doesn't require moral nihilism: the recognition that each act involves the potential for unknown and unchosen "trespasses" against others instead forms the recognition of our "responsibility" to them. But how are we *moved to act* on this recognition? Affect theories of shame—like those discussed in the previous section—provide a supplement for the "motivational deficit" from which theories of moral and political responsibility typically suffer. Identifying shame as the affect that attends responsibility is a first step toward understanding the broader dynamic between affect and action. In this section, I begin by analyzing an anecdote that demonstrates how these three components—responsibility, shame, and action—might provide an answer to the problem of motivation.

In a 1964 interview with German television personality Günter Gaus, Hannah Arendt describes what it was like living in Germany during the 1920s and '30s as a young, Jewish, woman-philosopher. She studied philosophy first at Marburg with Martin Heidegger and then at Heidelberg with Karl Jaspers (with whom she wrote a dissertation entitled "Love in St. Augustine"). Arendt explains that during these years of her young adulthood, she was more or less unconcerned with political matters. This is

[418] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 37.

hard to imagine, since Arendt, a Jewish woman, had a lot at stake in the outcome of those political matters. Indeed, she was not (or not yet) alert to how the German philosophical tradition was actually deeply complicit with what she calls her "political problem." My purpose in sharing these details is just to point out that for a self-described "political theorist," Arendt had surprisingly little interest in political matters for most of her early career. As she herself later implies, studying with Heidegger encouraged a certain opposition to political reality. How then should we understand Arendt's subsequent turn to the political?

The interview below is the only occasion where Arendt publicly reflects on her own personal, political "awakening." In the interview, Arendt admits that up until 1933 she was "interested...neither in politics nor in history," but that, "indifference was no longer possible in 1933." "For you as well?" asks Gaus.

> Arendt: Yes, of course. I read the newspapers intently. I had opinions. I did not belong to a party, nor did I have need to. By 1931 I was firmly convinced that the Nazis would take the helm. I was always arguing with other people about it but I did not really concern myself systematically with these things until I emigrated.
>
> Gaus: I have another question about what you just said. If you were convinced that the Nazis could not be stopped from taking power, didn't you feel impelled actively to do something to prevent this—for example, join a party—or did you no longer think that made sense?
>
> Arendt: I personally did not think it made sense. If I had thought so—it is very difficult to say all this in retrospect—perhaps I would have done something. I thought it was hopeless.
>
> Gaus: Is there a definite event in your memory that dates your turn to the political?
>
> Arendt: I would say February 27, 1933, the burning of the Reichstag, and the illegal arrests that followed during the same night. The so-called protective custody. As you know, people were taken to Gestapo cellars or to concentration camps. What happened then was monstrous, but it has now been overshadowed by things that happened later. This was an immediate shock for me, and from that moment on I felt responsible. That is, I was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander. I tried to help in many ways. But what actually took me out of Germany—if I should speak of that; I've never told it because it is of no consequence—

> Gaus: Please tell us.
>
> Arendt: I intended to emigrate anyhow. I thought immediately that Jews could not stay. I did not intend to run around Germany as a second-class citizen, so to speak, in whatever form. In addition, I thought that things would just get worse and worse. Nevertheless, in the end I did not leave in such a peaceful way. And I must say that gives me a certain satisfaction. I was arrested, and had to leave the country illegally—I will tell you how in a minute—and that was instant gratification for me. I thought at least I had done something! At least I am not "innocent." No one could say that of me![419]

Arendt's description of her indifference and hopelessness in the years prior to 1933 may feel familiar to many of us today, and it is one of the reasons that I find her remarks compelling.[420] It is what she admits after, however, that I propose to focus on: What marks the transformation from indifference to interest that underlies her "turn to the political"? In the interview with Gaus, Arendt describes a turning *point,* beyond which *not* acting (or not acting differently) was no longer possible. But what are the dynamics that turn this point?

"Feeling responsible," I suggest, *really is* a feeling, i.e., an emotion. Arendt doesn't explicitly name the affects attending her own felt sense of responsibility or the gratification at being not-"innocent." "Feeling impelled," I want to argue, refers to a feeling of responsibility that corresponds, not with *guilt* in a legalistic or juridical mode, but with shame. Likewise, the opposite of innocence is not guilt, which would imply *not* having done something. Shame, on the other hand, is not about what we do and don't do, or not only that. Unlike guilt, shame attends to a meta-level assessment of the self by the self. So while shame might arise as a response to some deed, the significance of that deed lies in how what we have done reflects a disjunction between who we have shown ourselves to be and who we take ourselves to be. That disjunction is the space that allows for self-criticism and self-

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[419] Arendt, "Interview with Gunther Gaus," *Essays in Understanding,* 3-5.

[420] With Berlant, I do not view "indifference" or "hopelessness" as politically meaningless or irrelevant experiences – quite the contrary. However, they are not the emotions that I associate with the version of "action in concert" I outline, and therefore I do not focus on them.

improvement, since the more distant or incompatible the two selves become, the more palpable the tension between them. As I explained in the previous section, one description of this tension emphasizes the temporal and psychological sense of splitting that experiences of shame provoke, or what Tony Steinbock calls "diremption."[421]

Arendt's testimony, I would argue, speaks to a meta-level concern about what it means to be human in a world in which the standards of humanity are actively being threatened and transformed. Shame is the interpersonal emotion through which these external transformations are felt most keenly since with shame, the external is also internal. Steinbock and others (e.g., Judith Butler) draw on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom shame is provoked by the eyes of the other. In other words, what we commonly think of as a purely personal experience of discomfort, actually arrives from outside of us, and traffics in that tension between inside and outside. For Butler, like Levinas, this is first and foremost an ethical encounter. Steinbock's phenomenological account, however, emphasizes that it also an affective one. Quoting Levinas, Steinbock writes,

> This shame amounts to a critique of the self, instigated by the Other—indeed, it could not originate in me—by showing up myself, my freedom as "not-innocent," as not justified. "Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent."[422]

Shame, understood in this existential mode, asks us to rethink the connections between freedom and action. When Arendt remarks, "I thought at least I had done something. At least I am not 'innocent,'" she draws attention to this same question. Freedom, when it is enacted, reveals itself as arbitrary and violent, never as innocent. An ethics of responsibility, à la Levinas, calls on us to take the ugliness of freedom seriously. The only way to maintain innocence is to give up freedom and morality – that is, to disavow action.

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[421] Steinbock, 72-74.
[422] Steinbock, 85-86.

Again, ethical agency—the "not-innocent"—does not correspond with "guilt," but with shame. Indeed, it would be absurd to suggest that Arendt, a Jew, was *accountable* or blameworthy for the political situation in Germany.[423] Instead, her feeling of responsibility is not a feeling of guilt, but of shame – similar, I believe, to the "elemental shame" that she references in a later essay:

> For many years now we have met Germans who claim they are ashamed of being Germans. I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human. This elemental shame, which many people of the most various nationalities share with one another today, is what finally is left of our sense of international solidarity; and it has not yet found an adequate political expression.[424]

How shame might find "an adequate political expression" is not a question that Arendt pursues, but it is what I consider below.

Shame, because it is both individual and shared, can also play an important galvanizing role in community formation and resistance movements. Here, I would refer again to Arendt's account of the conscious pariah emerging out of her analysis of Jewish assimilationism. In this case, shame foments a sense of collectivity rather than isolation.

III. Apparitions of emotion

In Arendt, the "space of appearance" generates the specifically phenomenological approach to power, subjectivity, and relationality that are the unique touchstones of her action-theory of politics. Rejecting the Kantian view that places reality beyond the reach of human knowledge and understanding, Arendt argues that our sense of reality—of belonging to a common, worldly reality—depends on the existence of a space between us where the world, i.e. phenomena, can appear. The "space of appearance in the widest sense of the word" refers to "the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where

[423] Recall the controversy around the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* when Arendt was accused of blaming the Jewish people for their victimization.
[424] In Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," *Essays in Understanding,* 121-132.

men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."[425] To make one's appearance explicit, for Arendt, is to *act;* i.e., to demonstrate *through* action "who" I am (a unique, irreplaceable individual), in contrast to "what" I am (e.g., human, Jewish, middle-class, etc.). To be deprived of this "space" is, as she writes in *The Human Condition,* "to be deprived of reality, which humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance." Since reality is "guaranteed by the presence of others," the correspondence between what appears—what has a "right to appear," in Butler's later formulation—and what has "reality," suggests that fashioning this reality is a common social and political project. I must "appear" with and before others in order to act: this implies that *whether* I appear is never simply a matter of my own sovereign will, and *whether* I act depends on the presence of others who act with me. I am precisely non-sovereign with respect to both action and appearance because I first require the presence of others who "see" me.

It is already possible to sense how this inextricability between action and appearance might be useful for Butler's project: it explains how both self-understanding and action depend on our relations with others, specifically relations of collaboration and even solidarity. However, this also means that the materialization of the "space of appearance" is always contingent, intangible, and uncertain as well. As Arendt explains in *The Human Condition,* the "space of appearance" is the potential for action that springs up between individuals who gather together and that materializes during the span of the activity itself:

> The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. Its peculiarity is that, unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men...but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.[426]

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[425] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 198-99.
[426] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 199.

She goes on to write that power, like the space of appearance, exists only in its actualization, so that "power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse."[427] I take the liberty of quoting Arendt at length here since I intend to return to this idea that power and the space of appearance are fleeting later on. Just like phenomena require the presence of others to guarantee their reality, the power animating political assemblies is only real—only *actual*—when action is carried out in concert with others. This idea is significant because it means that neither the political nor action are limited to an official, legal sphere of politics or governmentality. In fact, the "space of appearance" frequently materializes as extralegal zones for politics that overtly or covertly resist existing governments.

As Butler points out in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* however, Arendt's account of what happens when people "gather together" is limited by her disembodied and non-material conception of those who gather. Butler's efforts to "rethink the space of appearance" precisely emphasizes the concrete, material, and bodily dimensions of political action that Arendt ignores. In Arendt's terms, this includes all those aspects of material necessity belonging to the so-called private realm of the household.[428] I won't repeat the arguments that a rich tradition of feminist Arendt scholarship has already made critiquing the private/public distinction and its many consequences – scholarship that I surveyed in chapter two.[429] For the purposes of the present argument, I would just

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[427] *Ibid.,* 200.

[428] The private realm implies not just exclusion from the public, political realm, but the requirement to remain hidden and in darkness. Arendt states that the private/public split distinguishes 'activities which should be hidden in privacy and those which were worth being seen.' (Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 85) The suggestion is clear, even as it is implicit: What was not 'worth being seen, heard, and remembered' and what instead 'needed to be hidden in privacy' is associated not just with 'the necessity of the life process itself' and social conditions, but by extension, everything feminine, dark, and non-productive (that is, merely re-productive). Arendt explicitly places women and slaves in this category, as those 'devoted to bodily functions' (*Ibid.,* 72.), and implicitly extends the category to all laborers (especially those engaged in so-called unproductive labor; *Ibid.,* 83), as well as 'darkness and blackness' (See footnote 78 in Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 71).

[429] See, for instance: Bonnie Honig ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt,* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995; Adrienne Rich, 'Conditions for Work,' in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose,* New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979; Mary Dietz, 'Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics,' In *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory.* Eds. Mary Shanley and Carole Pateman. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991; and Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (Aug. 1981): 336.

reiterate that for Arendt, "the public" political domain excludes those activities and processes related to the body, including emotion.

It is worth emphasizing too that, for Arendt, the public/private distinction not only regulates what counts as political action (speech) and what doesn't (emotion), but *what/who is allowed to appear*. The "operation of power" that creates this division, as Butler notes, is treated as pre-political. She refers to this, quite appropriately, as a "topographical or even architectural regulation of the body...at the level of theory."[430] Butler's criticism of Arendt thus focuses on a set of concerns related to this distinction, especially as it works to limit who can appear in public. As she puts it:

> If we appear, we must be seen, which means that our bodies must be viewed and their vocalized sounds must be heard: the body must enter the visual and audible field. But is this not, of necessity, a laboring body and a sexual body, as well as a body gendered and racialized in some form? Arendt's view clearly meets its limits here, for the body is itself divided into the one that appears publicly to speak and act and another one, sexual, laboring, feminine, foreign, and mute, that generally is relegated to the private and prepolitical sphere.[431]

As Butler draws out here and in *Senses of the Subject*, the body does not disappear when speaking begins. Instead, "bodies act when they speak, to be sure, but speaking is not the only way that bodies act—and certainly not the only way they act politically."[432] Arendt, she argues, mistakenly "presumes that the body does not enter into the speech act."[433] In fact, it is the "space of appearance" that works against Arendt's own intentions to deny the body and embodied action political significance. After all, there is no such thing as a disembodied voice. Moreover, we know from experience—here the experience of being *in* assembly—that bodies frequently appear in ways that contest the privileging of speech and in the midst of somatic experiences that actually frustrate our bodily capacities for speaking

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[430] Butler, *Notes,* 88.
[431] *Ibid.,* 86.
[432] *Ibid.*, 207.
[433] *Ibid.,* 45.

in the first place. Throats that would perhaps speak are instead choked with tear gas, exhaustion, and emotion.

An important and welcome consequence of Butler's focus on bodily acts—what she elsewhere refers to as "the performative in the political"—is that considerations about the conditions for the possibility of action necessarily become more concrete and material: what a body needs in order to assemble becomes the object of the assembly's demands. The acknowledgement that individuals are differentially precarious establishes an ethos of *material* interdependency as the ground for this account of embodied political agency. Thus, what Butler terms "acting from precarity," represents a significant departure from Arendt even while it retains the basic structure of her action-theory: in Butler, the precarity of embodiment is not bracketed and confined to the private realm but made the animating ground for nonsovereign action in concert. When a group assembles, a "claim to the political"[434] is already being made and it takes the form of a "right to appear":

> [When] bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands: they are demanding to be recognized, to be valued, they are exercising a right to appear, to exercise freedom, and they are demanding a livable life.[435]

Thinking with Arendt's notion, this "right to appear" has to be understood as a right to politics, a right to political standing, dignity, and "reality," even a "right to have rights." While I accept this view, I also want to complicate it: the "claim to the political" that bodies make when they appear is always also a claim about what the political can be.

If we want to affirm with Butler, as I believe we should, the bodily dimensions of political action, then we also need to understand and affirm how those bodily dimensions are unavoidably affect-laden. Again, as Berlant rightly argues, "precarity" is not just an economic and political condition,

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[434] *Ibid.,* 18.
[435] *Ibid.*, 25.

but an "affective atmosphere," making "the precariat" a "fundamentally affective class."[436] I believe that Butler would agree that "breaking into the space of appearance" is not affectively neutral, nor always nonviolent, but quite often characterized by a mixture of rage, joy, pride, shame, and fear. Arendt's action-theory not only defines who is and who is not a potential subject of politics by excluding non-men and non-whites from the sphere of action, but there is a further implication as well: those excluded by the normative force of theory are also condemned for their emotional responses to this treatment[437] – as Arendt makes so very clear in her accounts of rage among *les misérables* of the French Revolution and the Black student protesters of the Black Power movement in the U.S. in the 1960s.[438] While Butler's work helps unpack—and even transform—how Arendt's action-theory regulates the body at the level of theory,[439] there is a prior operation of power implied by the "space of appearance" that Butler does not recognize. It is the regulation of the body and space at the level of emotion that I turn to now.

Referring to Arendt's public/private distinction, Jean Elshstain makes the compelling claim that, "The private is the world made necessary, in part, by shame." And here she means shame "and its felt experience as it surrounds our body's functions, passions, and desires."[440] Surprisingly, "shame" is not Elshstain's language, but Arendt's own. Arendt explicitly makes the claim in *The Human Condition* that, "the distinction between private and public coincides with the opposition of necessity and freedom,

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436 Berlant, 192-195.

437 As Hanna Pitkin puts it: "Can it be that Arendt held so contemptible a doctrine—one that denies the possibility of freedom, a truly human life, and even reality, to all but a handful of males who dominate all others and exclude them by violence from privilege? And when the excluded and miserable do enter history, can it be that Arendt condemns them for their rage, their failure to respect the 'impartiality of justice and law'?[...]On this account, the exclusion of 'everything merely necessary or useful' from political life means simply the exclusion of the exploited by the their exploiters, who can afford not to discuss economics, and to devote themselves to 'higher things,' because they live off the work of others." (In Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (Aug. 1981): 336.)

438 See chapter two of *On Revolution,* "The Social Question" and section 3 of "On Violence" in *Crises of the Republic,* as well as chapter seven of Kathryn Sophia Belle's *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question.*

439 Butler*, Notes,* 88.

440 Jean Elshstain, "Political Children," *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt,* ed. Bonnie Honig, 267.

of futility and permanence, and, finally, of shame and honor[...]"[441] The idea that the objects of the private realm and the objects of shame are coextensive is perhaps not surprising given the argument of the previous two sections, but I believe it is highly suggestive. In this instance, shame does not merely function as a property, descriptor, or secondary quality in relation to either the futility or privacy that characterizes bodily life – instead, shame actively shapes the very boundaries of these oppositions. Following Sara Ahmed, I argue that emotions like shame create the effect of the surfaces and boundaries that distinguish inside and out. In other words, shame is a response to transgression of the very boundaries it constitutes and regulates. If I'm right, this means that the normative "regulation of the body" that Butler diagnoses in Arendt—a regulation that actually excludes the body and emotion from the public, political realm—is actually organized by the movement of an emotion. That is, an emotion doing exactly the sort of thing that Arendt's theory of the "properly political" would want to deny.

What happens when what prevents the assembly from "appearing" is not anything so "apparent" as a law or public policy and not anything so present to mind as the unavoidably concrete material conditions of my life? Consider the impact of shame on this account: If the shame response typically consists in turning in and away, covering the face, especially the eyes, and blushing, as Sara Ahmed affirms in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*,[442] these turnings and coverings not only appear in space, but actually reconfigure that space and my location in it. This spatiality can in turn have a profound effect on my subjectivity by regulating access to the relations that constitute it. As Ahmed puts it in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* "The very physicality of shame – how it works on and through bodies – means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social

[441] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 73.
[442] See also: Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader,* eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 134-137.

spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame."[443] Shame, because it relies on a shifting organization of visibility and invisibility, showing and hiding—what Jacques Rancière would call "the distribution of the sensible"[444]—actually shapes and reshapes the "space of appearance." So Arendt's private/public distinction—what Butler calls "a topographical or even architectural regulation of the body"—is organized by a complex, and frequently pre-reflective, interplay of exposure, vulnerability, and hiding that characterizes shame. The body, undergoing a shame response—even its attempts to avoid shame—transforms the space of appearance. Indeed, the kind of avoidance behaviors that mark the mere threat of shame means that proximity to others is constantly being weighed and negotiated, sometimes preventing one's appearance and the very possibility of political action.

As I have shown, this attempt to relate thinking and acting has always been haunted by what appears in Arendt's work to be an unbridgeable gap between the active and the contemplative aspects of life.[445] Indeed, by now it is clear that Arendt's thinking, taken topographically, contains many such gaps, repeating and echoing like chasms, across her work as a whole. Not only the active and the contemplative life, but the private and public, shame and honor. Recall that constitutive of these distinctions is an entire architecture of apparitions: unlike the "space of appearance" brought forth by proper political action, any action originating in the private realm (though Arendt would not call it "action") is, by definition, hidden and shameful, and can only appear as that which is not allowed to appear. At the level of bodies and populations, shame creates "apartheid-like structures"[446] that are politically relevant because politically induced and a possible site of political resistance.

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[443] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 103.
[444] See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
[445] Kohn says that Arendt's answer to what prevents us from doing something disgraceful "is that it depends on the life of the mind, on thinking," but because "she insists that the split between thinking and acting is radical and complete, the answer appears paradoxical." Kohn, "Thinking/Acting," 124.
[446] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 106.

Seyla Benhabib suggests that there is a "dimension of the political which involves transforming private shame into a public claim, private darkness and blindness into public light and visibility. This kind of politics involves giving 'each other the world.'" "In this task of recovering the political," she continues, "we can do worse than to think with Hannah Arendt against Hannah Arendt."[447] But this is not really an example of thinking "Hannah Arendt against Hannah Arendt" when in fact "transforming private shame into a public claim" does nothing more than reaffirm the same basic duality between "private darkness" and "public light and visibility" that Arendt has already defined. Indeed, Arendt herself anticipates Benhabib when she writes in *The Human Condition*: "Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivitized and deindividualized, as it were into a shape to fit them for public appearance."[448] Actually, we might say, it is the fact of plurality and our dependency on plurality for acting that makes that possibility of action vulnerable to an emotion like shame in the first place!

Taking seriously what Arendt says about the unpredictability and irreversibility of action, as well as the discussion of shame in sections one and two above, we might conceive of at least three kinds of shame: 1) shame about how what "I" have done (i.e., how the consequences of my actions affect others) reflects on "me," 2) shame about what has been done to me, and 3) shame about what I am (e.g., "ashamed of being human"). While the plurality and publicity of action automatically entails a certain elevated vulnerability to shame (the world that makes appearance possible also threatens it), the only way to alleviate the suffering of shame is still to act. While this is perhaps only another way of articulating the account of forgiveness developed in *The Human Condition,* allowing "shame"—as an

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[447] Benhabib, "Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space," *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1993): 111.

[448] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 50.

embodied and intersubjective experience, as well as a social phenomenon with its own politics—to organize this process is important. Unlike "forgiveness," shame develops a field of specificity whose resources might greatly expand our ability to understand, on Arendt's account, what makes us act. While Arendt is comfortable with identifying a "somatic experience of laboring together," what about the somatic experience of acting together?[449] The difficulty of answering these questions stems not just from Arendt's aversion to taking issues of embodiment and femininity seriously, but also from her highly ambivalent engagement of many issues related to subjective experience.

My own view is that the real, material appearance of emotion in practices of assembly haunts *theories* of assembly—that is, emotions show up in performative theories of action as "apparitions." Though Butler's "space of appearance" corrects, or rather, clarifies, an ambiguity in Arendt's use of that concept, if there is an aspect of the private/public distinction that Butler does not quite escape, it is the emphasis on visibility—and consequently sight—that constitutes the 'appearing' body. While emotions do frequently appear in bodily expressions and gestures (recall the blush and the hiding impulse of shame), this is certainly not always the case. As Teresa Brennan's study of emotion in *The Transmission of Affect* persuasively argued, emotional phenomena is just as often "invisible," related to the olfactory and auditory senses rather than vision.[450] I refer to emotion in these enacted moments using the term *apparition* rather than appearance (and therefore to the "space of apparition" rather than

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[449] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 214. The importance of insisting on this question is only supported by Patchen Markell's point that, according to Arendt's "architecture" in *The Human Condition,* labor and action share more in common than Arendt scholars often assume: Unlike work, both labor and action are activities that cannot occur in solitude. In other words, there is arguably a comparable somatic and intercorporeal experience at stake in action as that which Arendt recognizes in labor. (Markell, "Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of *The Human Condition*," *College Literature* 38, no. 1 (2011): 15-42)

[450] Teresa Brennan's work in *The Transmission of Affect* shows how attending to the affective dimensions of our social relationality challenges Western philosophy's privileging of vision: "I suggest smell (in this case unconscious olfaction) is critical in how we 'feel the atmosphere' or how we pick up on or react to another's depression when there is no conversation or visual signal through which that information might be conveyed. I also suggest that hormonal interactions account for how the hormonal process situates people in different as well as similar emotional places..." (Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004: 9)

the "space of appearance"), in order to both distinguish my view from Arendt's speech-centered account, and to identify a disjunction between "appearance" and "visibility" that emotions open up. The term "apparition"' also has the benefit of denoting emotion's shadowy presence as the constitutive exclusion to the "appearance" of speech and reason throughout the Western philosophical tradition as a whole, and in the self-consciousness of many culturally Western subjects, for whom unawareness of their emotional and physiological states is often the result of a cultivated habit.[451] Indeed, it is precisely because of the fact that norms and conventions regulate so much of conscious awareness that we ought to recognize the unique, politically subversive, potential of emotions operating below this level, for instance in the gut.[452]

Surely, struggles against injustice are often *emotional* struggles – indeed, we often feel them in the *gut,* as *gut-wrenching.* But precisely *because* a troubling organization of the visible and invisible continues to operate behind the back of "the space of appearance," even in Butler's deployment of that Arendtian concept, it is not only that political action is *emotional* (incidentally), that emotion is a property or secondary quality of action, but that it is grounded in and *as* emotional experience as well. To suggest that emotion is another way that we witness the performative in the political is to see how emotion might expose and reconfigure the norms of visibility through which the political understands itself.

Unlike many of the examples of performative action that Butler examines in *Assembly,* the apparitions of emotion thus tarry on two levels: not only to contest and expand *who* can appear in the public political realm (much of civic space is more closed to women and people of color, who are viewed as more emotional and less rational and therefore less political), but *how* they are to appear.

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[451] See Alison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing,* ed. Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, (1989): 145-171.

[452] *Ibid.,* 161.

That is, emotion erupts out of the confines of the private sphere to struggle over the very boundary between the private and public, and to contest *what political action can be*. Precisely because emotion is in part defined by its location in the private realm and by its noncorrespondence with speech, it can operate as a mode of action with the peculiar performative force of an apparition, interrupting prevailing norms of political intelligibility and visibility. Emotion does not appear the way that speech or symbolic protest might, but Butler herself could hardly deny that grief does something political when it animates a silent vigil and when those grieved are precisely the ungrievable.[453]

IV. Toward a performative affect-theory

> "Shame, it might finally be said, transformation shame, *is performance*. I mean theatrical performance. Performance interlines shame as more than just its result or a way of warding it off, though importantly it is those things. Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and – performativity."
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> - Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*[454]

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* Sara Ahmed outlines a social theory of emotion, defining emotion as a form of action that involves the spatial organization and reorganization of bodies, where our orientations toward others are shaped by social norms and conventions, as well as the potential performative reshaping of those orientations. For Ahmed, then, it is not only that emotions are projected onto certain bodies in political spaces, but that political actors experience emotions which constitute, enact, and transform that space in the first place. One example I analyze below, the

[453] As Athena Athanasiou suggests in Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political,* 141.
[454] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 38.

contemporary SlutWalk movement, clearly demonstrates how this could be the case: women expose and resist a public sphere characterized by toxic shame, and thereby reconfigure the space and make-up of the public, assuming a "right to appear" (as Butler would put it) *as feeling*.

As Eve Sedgwick explains in *Touching Feeling,* "performativity" is theorized from two distinct lineages: speech act theory and theater studies. The resulting discourses are often conflated, creating significant confusion in contemporary theory, as well as a lack of conceptual clarity in particular theories, which often combine aspects of the two meanings of performativity in ways that go unspecified. Speech act theory emerges out of the work of J. L. Austin. For Austin, there is a class of grammatical forms which he calls "illocutionary" whose purpose is not primarily to describe what I am doing or to say *that* I am doing it, *but actually to do it*. Although Austin ambiguously claims that all statements have something of the performative about them, the instances of performativity that become "exemplary" of the grammatical form—what Sedgwick terms "*explicit performative utterances"*—consists of a verb that "names precisely the act (in Austin's term, the illocution) that the utterance itself performs."[455] The classic example of this that Austin gives is the sentence, "I promise." For Austin, this utterance is not just language, but action, since it does what it says: When I say, "I promise," I'm doing more than talking, I'm creating something new that didn't exist prior to that utterance, i.e., a promise. In other words, as Sedgwick puts it, "Austinian performativity is about how language constructs or affects reality rather than merely describing it."[456] These performatives speak to a "directly *productive* aspect of language" that, to be clear, relies on power of various kinds to carry out. While some speech acts—for instance, "I sentence you…"—seem to require antiquated modes of sovereign authority. Lauren Berlant calls this a "self-legitimating performativity" enthralled by a fantasy of sovereignty and

[455] Sedgwick, 3-4.
[456] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 5.

affective self-control. This account, she argues, "is inadequate for talking about agency outside of the power of the King's decree or other acts in proximity to certain performatives of law, like executions and pardons." Consequently, it is also a "distorting description" of how ordinary subjects take up their positions as agents *lacking* sovereignty.[457] However, I would argue that there are other kinds of speech acts, other performatives, that instead require plural collaboration and nonsovereignty to be effective. For instance, "I promise" and "I apologize," require the presence of others who take up and complete what an utterance of this kind puts into motion. Without the presence and cooperation of at least one other, these "speech acts" aren't acts at all, and therefore, power is not sovereign and unilateral, but nonsovereign and interdependent. Even if we limit the theory of performativity to speech, it is not the case that the performative speech act theorized there automatically becomes a sovereign, individual act of will.

Butler analyzes how performative speech becomes a mode of political action ("action in concert") in the co-authored text *Who sings the nation-state?* Referring to the 2006 mass demonstrations of undocumented workers, Butler describes the moment when those gathered began to sing the U.S. national anthem in Spanish as,

> ...a kind of performative contradiction [leading] not to impasse but to forms of insurgency. For the point is not simply to situate the song on the street, but to expose the street as the site for free assembly…They have no right of free speech under the law although they're speaking freely, precisely in order to demand the right to speak freely.[458]

The "productive aspect of language" in this case operates via a performative contradiction in existing laws and attitudes about the rights of noncitizens. Singing the national anthem in Spanish *does* something in excess of what it simply "says" or "describes." And yet Butler also references the spatial,

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[457] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 98.
[458] Judith Butler and Gayatri Sprivak. *Who sings the nation-state?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (New York: Seagull Books, 2010), 62-64.

nonverbal dimensions of performativity taking place in the street and constituting the street. For Butler, nonverbal—i.e., embodied—actions are perhaps less explicit, but no less performative. From her earliest accounts of gender and performativity, such as the 1990 essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler's account of performativity clearly goes beyond the verbal domain of Austin's theory to integrate resources drawn from another tradition of theorizing "performance" and "acting," *viz.* theater and the dramatic arts. For instance, in Butler's early work, gender is considered an "act" – active (a repeated doing) and dramatic/theatrical. Despite this interest in the nonverbal registers of gesture, movement, and expression that appear to bring these two approaches to performativity together, readers like Sedgwick sense that there is nevertheless an impulse in Butler's work, and the work of other deconstructionists, to subsume the nonverbal under the linguistic; i.e. a deconstructive project of analyzing "apparently nonlinguistic phenomena in rigorously linguistic terms."[459]

However, the Austinian discourse that Butler's reading emphasizes is not the only one invoked by the term "performativity" – in fact, speech-act theory has at least one very important limitation as a theory of performativity, *viz.* its speech-centeredness. With Eve Sedgwick and others, I want to expand the performative to include non-verbal, non-linguistic, and non-propositional gestures in addition to the linguistic. For Sedgwick, there is something limiting and false about attempts to read a nonverbal gesture in the "language" and with the conceptual tools of a performative utterance. In Butler's early work on action—for instance in the 1997 book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*—this was precisely her strategy. However, by 2016, with *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* the primacy of the linguistic becomes of matter of more ambiguity:

> Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts livable life at the forefront of politics. And this seems to be happening before any group lays out its demands or begins to explain itself in proper political speech. Taking

[459] Sedgwick, 6.

> place outside of parliamentary modes of written and spoken contributions, the provisional assembly still makes a call for justice. But to understand this "call," we have to ask whether it is right that verbalization remains the norm for thinking about expressive political action. Indeed, we have to rethink the speech act in order to understand what is made and what is done by certain kinds of bodily enactments: the bodies assembled "say" we are not disposable, even if they stand silently. This expressive possibility is part of plural and embodied performativity that we have to understand as marked by dependency and resistance…[460]

Sedgwick earlier criticized Butler's propensity to analyze "a particular gestural style as a variety of performative utterance."[461] Here, Butler surely allows verbalization to recede, even emphasizing the importance of this for expanding how "performativity" speaks to politics and justice. And yet, we could ask whether Butler has really gone beyond analyzing nonlinguistic phenomena in linguistic (albeit nonverbal) terms if "the bodies assembled 'say' we are not disposable." Although the selection quoted above clearly displays an aspiration to get beyond the "rigorously linguistic terms" that characterize much of her previous work, my sense is that Butler has not yet developed an adequate framework or vocabulary for describing exactly how "nonlinguistic phenomena" are nonlinguistic. I take it that much contemporary work in affect studies in general contributes to understanding a set of nonlinguistic or prelinguistic concepts that might provide an answer. And on the issue of performativity in particular, a central aim of Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* is to bridge the gap between speech act theory and another discourse of performativity, from theater studies, in order to develop a meaning of "performative" that might "span the polarities of nonverbal and verbal action."[462]

But why might it be important to "get beyond" the verbal and linguistic emphasized in the Austinian tradition of theorizing performativity? Limiting performative action to speech fails to account for much of the affective registers animating collective life. As Cynthia and Julie Willett explain in a forthcoming book that discusses the philosophical and psychological dimensions of

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[460] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* 18-19.
[461] Sedgwick, 6.
[462] Sedgwick, 7.

humor, as well as its uses for feminist politics, "affect" is an important component of what makes us "us" and it primarily operates precisely at this "pre-verbal" or unconscious level": "The term affect indicates a significant visceral component of our agential selves that roots much of our emotional experience in the gut brain and/or the pre-verbal, unconscious right brain."[463]

So how does this theatrical account of performativity differ from the Austinian discourse, and what does it offer for understanding nonverbal and nonlinguistic performatives? For Sedgwick, shame can, under certain conditions, occupy the position of the Austinian utterance. "Transformational shame," as Sedgwick puts it, *is* performance. By this, she means theatrical performance, and it is easy to see why: "Shame," Sedgwick continues, "is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and—performativity."[464] Recalling that the shame dynamic is one about vulnerability and exposure—about regulating the very boundaries that define inside and outside, and consequently defining what is allowed to appear and what must is shame-worthy and therefore must be hidden—shame clearly relies on both a stage and an audience for its effectiveness. The central place of publicity and spectatorship for the possibility of shame points to the theatrical account of performativity, and yet, as I argued in the previous section, the space that shame and other emotions create as an aspect of this performance is not quite the "space of appearance" as Arendt and Butler theorize that concept. Bringing together the theatrical and deconstructive/Austinian meanings of "performativity," the project Sedgwick is engaged in with *Touching Feeling,* makes it possible to theorize the space of apparition as one of plural performative action in concert.

Returning to the example of the 2006 noncitizen mass protests, Butler's reading in *Who sings the nation-state?* emphasizes that the "space of appearance" is a performative concept because it is a

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463 Cynthia and Julie Willett in the introduction to their forthcoming co-authored book *Uproarious: How Feminist Comics and Other Subversives Talk Truth* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
464 Sedgwick, 38.

space created by individuals who assemble and indoingso claim a right to inhabit public space that does not belong to them, i.e., claim a right to assembly by assembling (in an extralegal or nonlegal manner). By assembling, in other words, the marchers paradoxically enact a right that they do not have, as well as an alternative model for belonging.

But as another reading of these same protests shows, there is more at stake for recognizing the role of emotion than Butler lets on. Cristina Beltrán also draws our attention the "profoundly *political* character" of these noncitizen mass protests by recognizing the widespread efforts by immigrants and their allies who "made the unprecedented decision to choose public action over fear and concealment."[465] Her account invokes Arendt:

> Across the United States, noncitizens were actualizing a power they did not yet have…Arendt's analysis of politics as the space of appearance...helps to foreground what I take to be one of the most significant aspects of the 2006 demonstrations... I characterize the immigrant counterpublics of 2006 as practicing forms of 'festive anger' that challenged the dehumanizing effects of anonymity and illegality.[466]

Here, I would argue, Beltrán identifies an important dimension of these demonstrations that Butler misses, namely by emphasizing how emotion moves through those gathered. Beltrán's account describes how "festive anger" challenged popular narratives about the meaning of the demonstrations and changed the space and the make-up of the demonstrations themselves. She cites *Mother Jones*, which reported that in the midst of the whistling and cheering, and American and Latin American flags waving together during a May 1st protest in San Francisco, there were office works "caught in the frenzy only because they were headed out to lunch found themselves unaccountably moved by what they saw."[467]

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[465] Cristina Beltrán, "Going Public: Hannah Arendt, Immigrant Action, and the Space of Appearance," *Political Theory* 37, no. 5 (Oct. 2009): 596.
[466] *Ibid.*, 597-598.
[467] *Ibid.,* 607.

Recall that for both Arendt and Butler, the specifically political power that the space of appearance materializes is *fleeting.*[468] "[P]ower," Arendt writes, "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse."[469] We might say that this is precisely the performative dimension of power – that it only exists in its enactment. And yet, the ecstatic and excessive characteristics of affect present a different spatio-temporal picture; that is, of a performative power that spreads and lingers.

Shame, despite its negative connotations, can do this transformative political work too. I would even argue that—taking seriously what we know about the way shame works to regulate the very boundaries between private and public, introversion and extroversion—it is transformative at a metalevel. Consider, for instance, how women who participate in SlutWalk transform fear and shame into something like pride or joy. This is how Cindy and Julie Willett read the political work of SlutWalk, a women's and sex-worker's rights movement championed nowadays by social media influencer and women's rights activist Amber Rose. Willett and Willett write that, "Humor can offer a cathartic conversion of a harmful shame to a promiscuous pride, the kind of pride that is central to liberation, decolonization, and norm-changing social movements like SlutWalk, a now global movement that first began as a protest that originated in 2011 after a now infamous Toronto police officer chastised women suggesting they should 'avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.'"[470] The SlutWalk movement resists the negative effects of shame and transforms the social atmosphere surrounding it by leaning into shame and performatively contradicting its power; that is, by citing and then subverting how shame configures public space. As Willett and Willett suggest, this transformation may occur as the effect of a collective catharsis—a "comic relief"—that spurs social change in part by

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[468] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* 77.
[469] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 200.
[470] Willett and Willett in chapter four of their forthcoming book *Uproarious,* "A Catharsis of Shame: The Belly Laugh, Amber Rose, and the SlutWalk Movement."

appealing to our often unconscious, "gut level" feelings. While solitary practices of "venting" may be more or less therapeutic, Willett and Willett point to what psychologists have long suspected about the power of certain forms of art and ritual as examples of *collective* catharsis. These have the effect of not only empowering participants, but of transforming the norms that regulate their shared social world. Importantly, these "rituals," including comedic moments, need not be verbal to count as transformative performance – shame and humor are considered particularly infectious, meaning that so much about how they *affect* and what they communicate never rises to the level of conscious reflection.

As Willett and Willett note, catharsis needs to be more than merely purgative to effect political transformation. While SlutWalk is a good example of a collective catharsis transforming a negative emotion into a positive one, I wouldn't say that transforming a negative into a positive is always necessary or preferable. Instead, political transformation can also mean transforming how "we," a collective, comport ourselves to shame and how we relate ourselves to the social sources of shame. Importantly, the purpose of dredging up and displaying how shame is experienced—doing this painful work—is not merely to vent or purge, but to expose the sources of shame and to understand its operation. In other words, to expose that and how shame is never just an individual experience, but that it reflects an underlying social structure. Of course, the additional work of collective shame catharsis involves subverting shame's isolating and individuating function. Recall that for Eve Sedgwick, shame just is the dynamic of relation and individuation that grounds self-formation. Thus, she argues that, "therapeutic or political strategies aimed directly at getting rid of individual or group shame, or undoing it, have something preposterous about them: they may 'work'—they certainly have powerful effects—but they can't work in the way they say they work."[471] Sedgwick means by this, I think, that projects that attempt to undo or erase the traces of shame are a bit naïve, since they do not

[471] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* 62-63.

sufficiently recognize how shame constitutes who we are – there's no inch of who we are that is untainted. For Sedgwick too, then, although collective catharsis often does the important work of driving something hidden out into the open (see Willett and Willett's discussion of catharsis as "social menstruation" in Greek tragedy), its aim cannot be merely purgative and cannot be straightforwardly transformative if, by transformative, is meant the erasure of shame.

I believe that insisting on finer distinctions between different permutations of shame—for instance between shame about "flawed agency" and shame about "flawed being" (which usually picks out the unchosen race-, gender-, class-, and other dimensions of one's positionality in a hierarchical social order)—is needed in order to fully assess Sedgwick's claim about the "preposterous" nature of therapeutic and political projects that try to get rid of shame. Although I take Sedgwick's point seriously, the issue is no doubt more complicated. The #MeToo movement provides a recent example, to my mind, of a project that in contrast to a movement like SlutWalk, does not deliberately aim to transform or dissolve shame. It says that shame need not be transformed into honor, pride, or joy—i.e., so-called "positive" emotions—in order to appear in public and do something political. In that instance, the peculiar performative force of shame is what happens when something that is supposed to remain hidden and shameful, is brought to light and made public. Shame is the emotion that describes emotionality according to Western philosophical, as well as socio-cultural, norms — public displays of emotion, especially negative emotions, are themselves *shameful*.

This creative transformation, and at the same time resistance, is of and through emotion. It is perhaps a personal emotional transformation, but even this is only made possible by the presence of a larger assembly—action "in concert"—that dissolves the solitariness and separation that shaming enacts. Slut shames and body shames configure a certain "space of appearance"—a space that legislates and enforces, via the work of shaming, whether and how women are considered fit to appear. Thus, the circulation of emotion embodied in this assembly also transforms the space of the street.

While we have seen how the relegation of emotion to the private realm depends upon a prior structure of hiddenness and appearance organized by shame, in SlutWalk, this organization is recurrently challenged by the "snaps," "outbursts," and the "festive rage" (discussed below) of emotion as a performative occasion that thereby convenes a different "space of appearance." So, while shame was supposed to mark *in*action, we witness womanly, precarious, unapologetically corporeal acts churning in the so-called private realm that work with and against shame, even deflecting shame back on the patriarchal institutions and values that encourage shame about everything from women's clothing to menstruation.[472]

Assemblies like SlutWalk, I would argue, not only break into space and reconfigure its terms—a space that is characterized by a certain violence against women and the idea that they might be able to "appear" as they like without fear of physical, emotional, and psychic harm—but it engages in a struggle over the right to feel (the right to feel pride rather than shame about one's embodiment and appearance in space, for instance) and the right to appear *as* feeling. And this, again, is the benefit of engaging in struggles over how shame in particular is distributed: Because shame is the affect that regulates the appropriateness of feelings in general—who feels, how feelings are expressed (or not), which feelings are expressed (or not), and whether these expressions are allowed to appear (or whether they remain shadowy apparitions more difficult to recognize and understand). In my view, the more general lesson we can take away from this study of the transformative potential of collective catharsis is the necessity of its "collective" aspect. Like the speech acts that Butler and Arendt emphasize, acts of collective catharsis like these that spur (or not) larger political movements are examples of plural performative "action in concert."

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[472] Again, I am in conversation with Willett and Willett's account of collective catharsis in the forthcoming *Uproarious* here.

A theory of performative action more attuned to the affective dimensions of political life—first and foremost the affective dimensions of assembly—yields a more promising (and more phenomenologically accurate) account of the relation between emotion and action. It is important to ask the question: Why do we assemble? What *moves* us to act in concert with others? Consider Beltrán's office workers from the example above. They are moved by the festive anger of the protest and unaccountably—that is, spontaneously—join them: Perhaps they even forgot to go back to work. Perhaps they returned home after the protest with that feeling of 'festive anger' still buzzing in their limbs. According to Butler's account, the power of the space of appearance dissipates when the assembly disperses. But those who join and rejoin the assembly—those, in other words, who are resilient—must present another picture. Indeed, our futures depend on it. In dark times, when one keenly feels their own precarity, assembling is not only an act of demonstrating my precarity, demanding the alleviation of my suffering, or even of posing my resistance in the face of precarity, as Butler rightly argues. I would also say that demonstrating resistance to precarity clearly involves sharing in the feeling of vitality of the demonstration – whether that be joy, festive anger, pride, grief, etc. (The clearest evidence for this is simply that those not initially involved are drawn into the assembly, are moved to act, to share *in* the act, and not just to spectate.) And yet, these emotions do not simply dissipate with the assembly. They linger. Feelings of frustration, exhaustion, and powerlessness are not redoubled by a five-mile protest march, but more often they are transformed into a renewed energy for resistance that remains with protesters after they leave.

Conclusion: Shame and Social Justice

> "What we are talking about here is the hardest problem: understanding the difficulty of unlearning attachments to regimes of injustice."
>
> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*[473]

I want to conclude by tentatively offering some further ideas about how shame might relate to social justice. I say "tentatively" not only because I am still thinking through these ideas, but because I want to take seriously the very pervasive and damaging effects of racial-, gender-, and class-based shames for members of socially marginalized groups. In other words, I want to be attentive to how the many different kinds of shame (that I only begin to lay out in chapter four) are unevenly distributed throughout a given society, or, put a different way, how members of society are differentially *prone* to shame and to different kinds of shame. I have argued, in part, that the ambivalence at the heart of shame makes it an interesting site for studying the role of emotion in political action. It means that despite shame's negative connotations, its effects on the political realm are not wholly negative but frequently transformative – other emotions are not potentially transformative/actionist in the same way precisely because no other emotion cuts so deep or calls so much into question. If the social self is constituted in and through shame, then nonnormative subjectivity is presumably experienced, following David Haekwon Kim, as the "inward resonance of a suppressive social order." While everyone experiences shame as a necessary and ongoing aspect of self-formation, there are also

[473] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 184.

politically induced modes of shame that saturate to differing degrees the way that marginalized and nonnormative people experience the world.

Plenty of political philosophers, most notably Martha Nussbaum, disavow what shame does in political life precisely because of these differentially toxic effects, however we have also seen that political movements that center shame (e.g., SlutWalk, #MeToo) can be powerfully subversive and transformative. My aim in this brief conclusion is to explore a bit more this tension and to enumerate more clearly a few ways that shame might be a tool for social justice movements: First, shame can motivate individuals to act on their recognition of responsibility and, in a similar manner, shame can be deployed to motivate others to act in accordance with shared values; second, individuals might contribute to larger social movements by "performing"—demonstrating and exposing—shame in ways that strip shame of the toxic, antipolitical, elements that require hiding, silence, and isolation; and finally, sometimes sitting with/in shame is a way of acting in accordance with justice, whether or not that prolonged exposure to shame aims at a particular outcome.

The first way that shame might contribute positively to social justice efforts directly invokes a main argument of this dissertation, namely that affects move us to act. As I illustrated in my discussion of Arendt's political awakening in section 4.II, there seems to be a crucial connection between shame and ethical responsibility that invites political engagement. The *feeling* of responsibility, I argue, is a shame-feeling; and meanwhile, the psychosocial and physiological dimensions of that shame response are what moves us to act on our ethical responsibility to others. Of course, shame is fundamentally ambivalent with respect to action—it can spur action, but it can also stall it. However, I believe that when we deploy shame in political settings, we are most often seeking greater communion rather than greater social isolation. As an example: In June of 2018, I attended a Families Belong Together Rally at the Atlanta Detention Center. The rhythm of the march—feet on pavement, chanting, drumbeats—gave the assembly direction and cohesiveness. After marching for more than an hour through

Downtown Atlanta, we arrived at our destination, where everyone seemed to mill around, unsure of what to do. Suddenly and spontaneously, the assembly began chanting one word over and over again: "Shame! Shame! Shame!..." I would argue that when "we" deploy shame in this way, we are recognizing—or grasping at—the motivating (and perhaps also unifying) powers of shame. We think that if we can get the other to feel shame, then they might be motivated to *do* something: to take responsibility, to acknowledge a wrong, to change their behavior or conduct. And sometimes, no doubt, we are also implicating ourselves. When a group chants "Shame!" that shame might an intervention, a break, a shock, that calls us to intervene.

Shame can call upon a shared narrative—of what you have done (in concert with others) or what has been done to you (and others)—that establishes a basis for collective action in a performative mode. In a case where a shared sense of shame constitutes collective action, those performative enactments of shame identify and expose the underlying structure that makes shame possible, but by definition it also refuses those aspects of shame that make it antipolitical: hiddenness, silence, and isolation. So while I want to foreground that there are many important examples of political action that work against shame by transforming it into pride or joy – for instance "Black is beautiful," Gay Pride, SlutWalk, etc. – I also want to consider projects that approach the issue of shame rather differently. As I discussed in chapter four, it seems like a movement like #MeToo is not interested in transforming shame into something else. Instead, my reading emphasizes the performative work of demonstrating and exposing shame that in turn makes a political demand to transform the social order thereby exposed.

And yet if we only project shame outwards, we may just be attempting to shift responsibility—that is, to "dump," as Teresa Brennan would put it, the affective load of shame onto someone else. In chapter two I briefly discussed the work of feminist philosophers for whom emotion can function as a kind of moral alert system. So Elizabeth Spelman describes how anger and other so-called "outlaw

emotions" establish women as moral agents capable of making moral judgments through their emotions, *and* how feelings like anger, arising in otherwise "normal" circumstances, can alert the angry person to a sense that what is "normal" may not be morally acceptable. And yet Spelman also warns, in another essay, that we should not make emotion as such virtuous. Using the example of white feminists, she shows how justice actually demands that we feel shame—to sit with shame, not to rest in ignorance or innocence, and not to "dump" or displace these painful, but necessary, negative emotions onto others.

My suggestion, following Spelman, is that one way shame becomes political—becomes action—is when we sit with shame, not yet rejecting or abjecting it, but in the performance of shame rejecting some of its toxic and antipolitical effects. At the same time, it requires not jumping too fast to act or displace,[474] and also not simply apologizing and moving on.[475] And this may be either a moment or a project of shame. Again, I believe there are deep distinctions that should be made among how dominant and subordinate groups experience shame – most of all because how shame and its negative effects are differentially induced is a political project aligned with the power of dominant groups. For instance: While shame becomes a kind of moral achievement for the white feminists that Spelman describes, involving some aspect of deliberation and/or choice, shame is not similarly "desirable" or chosen for nonwhites—there, the emotional work might involve resisting or subverting one's shame-proneness. What I have tried to examine is how for some, working against shame is sometimes a political practice of working through shame, i.e., through a mode of performative action that proceeds by citing what it wants to reiterate, iterate differently, or transform. As Sara Ahmed says, the power and authority of performativity, its ability to generate certain effects, first of all "depends

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[474] Julie Beck and Alexis Shotwell, interview, "The Folly of 'Purity Politics.'" *The Atlantic*. January 20, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/01/purity-politics/513704/>

[475] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 119-120.

on the sedimentation of the past," "it works by citing norms and conventions that already exist."[476] The dark underbelly of the performative theory I pursue, then, is that it depends on shame's "sedimentation," which can be cited and subverted and transformed in various ways, but may not be fully overcome. What the performative does, on my understanding, is twofold: it is dramatic/theatrical—i.e., it brings something forward, demands an audience, makes something public that had been private; and it does what it says—referencing, repeating, and transforming some existing feature of experience. And in and through tha performative enactment of shame we already refuse or subvert two of shame's prominent aspects: the demand to hide and to isolate. By moving with shame—together—we refuse these aspects while at the same time demonstrating—exposing—the underlying infrastructures (material, emotional, psychosymbolic) that differentially distribute shame.

[476] *Ibid.,* 93.

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