Justice: On Relating Private and Public

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BY ALMOST ALL the available evidence, we are witnessing a widespread turning away from public life. The prevailing disillusionment with established leadership and institutions produces not protest but withdrawal into privacy, yet privatization manifestly is not providing the comfort and security we seek. And all that anyone seems able to muster for calling people back to the care of this republic is the familiar and incompatible pair of devices: the exhortation to civic duty, and the appeal to self-interest. Neither seems to be doing much good. The left diagnoses a "legitimation crisis," but has its own difficulties in summoning up a public movement. Hardly anyone today would know what to make of Tocqueville's simple observation that taking away politics from the American would be taking away half his life, let alone Aristotle's definition of man as the political animal. The possibility that public participation might be intrinsically rewarding, a fulfillment of our nature rather than a burden, is pursued by almost no one. This essay attempts to pursue it through a critical reexamination of the meaning of public and private in the thought of Hannah Arendt, the political theorist who wrote most powerfully on that theme in our time, and who tried hardest to renew our access to politics as a positive gratification, a "public happiness."

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I.

When we talk of public and private, do we know what we are talking about? Wanting to theorize, we seize on or are seized by the first image that springs to mind: the private is "in here," personal, intimate, closest to the self, secluded from unwanted others, where we have "privacy" and are free to be ourselves. The public, by contrast, is "out there," impersonal, distant, formal; whatever goes "out in public" must be ready for "publication," its "private parts" properly clothed. This is the view developed most recently by Richard Sennett, who speaks in spatial metaphors of a "geography" of public and private. It is a plausible view.

Yet, given this view, what shall we make of the joint-stock, limited-liability corporation, the heart of "private enterprise"? Surely it is neither personal nor intimate, no locus of privacy. The economist obviously distinguishes public from private in a different way, and so would we had our first image been economic. Here "public sector" is divided from private on the basis of ownership, and public means, roughly, government, the state.

Hannah Arendt proposed still a different view, but warned that we might experience "extraordinary difficulty" in understanding the "decisive division" between public and private, because we have lost the experience from which those terms derive their meaning, particularly the experience of a genuine public life. For her, public is almost synonymous with political, but political is not to be equated with governmental; instead, it concerns action in a community of peers. Neither a crowd of strangers at a movie, nor the Department of Defense would qualify.

There is considerable basis in etymology for Arendt's claim that we have lost some earlier awareness of the value of public life. In its ancient origins, being private did mean being deprived, and in English the public concerns the good of a single communal body before it refers to a collection of individuals *seriatim.* However, the private is also early associated in English with privilege, the advantages of withdrawal. Nor will it do flatly to equate the public with politics, office, or citizenship, as Arendt sometimes does.

Our difficulty in theorizing about these concepts comes partly from the fact that in ordinary use words like "public" and "private" function mainly as adjectives. To turn them into general categories, we must either hypostasize them into substantives, as Arendt does: "The Public" and "The Private," which makes them seem mysterious entities,
seducing us into reification. Or else we must attach the adjectives to some general noun, used metaphorically: the public (or private) sector, sphere, domain, or realm; whereupon we are likely to fall victim to the unexamined connotations of our own metaphor.3

Private and public, it is important to realize, are relative terms. Things in the world are not generally classifiable exclusively as either public or private. It is not just that historically the content of public life has changed. Even more important is the sort of distinction C. Wright Mills drew in The Sociological Imagination, between “the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure.”4 Personal troubles “occur within the character of the individual and . . . his immediate relations with others.” So their “statement and resolution” properly lie with

the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu—the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter.

Public issues of social structure, however, transcend “these local environments of the individual,” and deal with

the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter.

Mills’s distinction, however, leaves unclear the problem of perception (e.g., a lost job perceived as a personal failure or as part of a widespread social condition). Mills also fails to make clear that a social condition becomes a public issue only when it is widely perceived as a problem, and as remediable through public action.

Our ways of distinguishing public and private, then, are heterogeneous, and the question of who gets to do the defining is itself part of the problem. Still, it may be useful to delineate three dimensions along which we distinguish public from private, and which therefore help to make up our concept of the public. I shall call them the dimension of access or attention, the dimension of impact or effect, and the dimension of governance or control.

First, something may be public in the sense that it is accessible to all, open to scrutiny by anyone, visible as a focus of attention. Here the term connects with publicity, public knowledge, public opinion, and going “out in public,” and contrasts with reserved, closed, hidden.
Second, something may be public in the sense that it affects all or most of us, public in its consequences and significance. This objective publicness may go unrecognized by the people affected; thus the first and second sort of publicness really are distinct. The decisions of, say, a private corporation can have enormous public impact and importance. Here the opposite of public is not secluded or withdrawn, but personal, of limited impact, affecting only select individuals or groups. Mills’s distinction between personal troubles and public issues, then, telescopes the first and second dimensions of the public: troublesome social conditions are public in their impact, but become public issues only when made the focus of public attention.

When they do, it is usually with a view toward the third dimension: public direction or control. This is the publicness of government, public administration, and collective action. It includes Arendt’s main conception. But public direction or control is in itself difficult to define, particularly in times like ours, for a nation may be governed more by “private” aggregations of power than by its official government, and its government may be so dominated by special interests that it functions more as a private than a public agency. What are we to say about multinational corporations, some so large and powerful as to dwarf many sovereign states? Are they public or private? What of hybrids like Amtrak and the Postal Service? What of our public regulatory agencies, so often dominated by the private industry they are meant to control? What of the whole bureaucratic military-industrial complex, with its public largesse for private corporations, its exchanges of high-level personnel between government and industry?

Clearly the third dimension for distinguishing public from private contains profound ambiguities between form and substance. Formal control by an official government need not mean actual public control. But then, what is actual, substantive public control? The answer is not easy, but one suspects that our theoretical concerns intersect here with our practical, political ones, at a point where Hannah Arendt’s political thought was also focused.

II.

The distinction between public and private, Arendt tells us, “corresponds to” that between “the household and the political realm” that first emerged in ancient Greece and continued until the onset of the
modern age, when it was blurred by the emergence of a third "realm" she calls the "social." In the ancient world, public and private were sharply distinguished, and the former was the locus of value. The public realm, the *polis* way of life, was what set off Greek from barbarian, what was gradually wrested from the domination of kings and masters, what made possible a free and truly human life.

The rise of the city-state meant that man received "besides his private life a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*. Now every citizen belongs to two orders of existence; and there is a sharp distinction in his life between what is his own (*idion*) and what is communal (*koinon*)."

The household was a "pre-political realm," a necessary prerequisite for citizenship, but strictly a means to that higher end. First, that household was ruled by domination and force, by a *despotes*, while *polis* life was carried on through speech and reason. Second, by contrast with household inequality and despotic barbarian kingship, *polis* citizenship was a relationship of equality. The *polis* "knew only 'equals,'" though the Greek notion of equality was different from ours; it had nothing to do with universal natural rights, nor did it assume parity in wealth, talent, or ability. Rather, it was a special, artificially created equality of status as citizens. Thus, to be a citizen "meant neither to rule or be ruled."

Third, citizenship in the *polis* meant admission to a public "sphere of freedom," while the private sphere was governed by necessity—not just the domination of the master over the family and slaves, but the "necessities of life" that would rule even the master if he did not have others to provide for him. The household was considered the locus of economic life; it was the basic unit of production, as is suggested by the Greek word for household (*oikia*) which is the root of our word "economics." It was the proper place for labor, for activities "related to the maintenance of life," Arendt argues, just as the more direct necessities of bodily function and species reproduction are properly hidden away in privacy.

Accordingly, "no activity that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining only the life process, was permitted to enter the political realm." Anything "economic" was "non-political . . . by definition," for "everything merely necessary or useful" had to be "strictly excluded" from the *bios politikos*, the realm of freedom.

Arendt is highly ambiguous about whether freedom and action are possible in private, or only in the public realm. Perhaps she meant to
distinguish between action in general, and great or heroic action, which somehow embodies the essence of what action is all about. The former characterizes human beings as such, can occur even in private and social life, perhaps even includes behavior; the latter is confined to the public realm and requires a political arena. Thus Arendt says that “Action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm,” because excellence “by definition requires” the presence of others “as an audience, and not just the casual, familiar presence of one’s equals or inferiors,” but necessarily “the formality of the public, constituted by one’s peers.”

This brings us to self-revelation and the quest for glory. Action is the revelation and expression of self, of human uniqueness. “Variations and distinctions” occur already in lower life forms, “but only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself,” so that it “becomes uniqueness.” Thus, “in acting and speaking, we show who we are, reveal our unique personal identities,” disclosing “‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ we are.” The making of objects, even works of artistic genius, cannot reveal who a unique self is, Arendt argues, for the creator is always more than the creation. This may be true of any particular action as well: I am always more than this or that action I have done; but the sum total of my actions, my life story, does tell who I was.

Sometimes it seems that this revelation can take place in private life; Arendt argues that love—which can survive only in private—nevertheless has “an unequalled power of self-revelation,” of disclosing “who . . . the loved person may be.” Moreover, in modern life people reveal themselves “only in the privacy of their families or the intimacy of their friends,” while in the ancient understanding, it was the public realm that “was reserved for individuality.” “Political man” is characterized by what Arendt, following John Adams, calls “the passion for distinction . . . a desire to be seen, heard, talked of, approved and respected,” a passion whose “virtue” is the “desire to excel another,” and whose vice is “ambition,” aiming “at power as a means of distinction.”

Besides distinction, Arendt sometimes suggests that reality itself is at stake here. For “appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by our selves—constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life . . . lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence.” Thus, the restricted audience of family and friends can provide only a “limited reality.”
This seems to be partly because the public realm offers a *plurality* of perspectives unavailable in privacy, and partly because it offers a *permanence* of remembrance.

Only the public realm, a kind of organized remembrance, offers "the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself," an earthly "immortality."25 Works of art, the creations of individual genius, are also lasting, but as we saw, they do not capture the creator's full self; love captures the essence of the self, but offers no permanence.

In the modern world, Arendt argues, the public and private realms have been blurred and largely supplanted by something she calls "society" or "the social," a "relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincides with the emergence of the modern age." The social is "neither private nor public, strictly speaking."26 In general it seems that the social realm is concerned with economics and production and necessity, which were private in the ancient world; yet it is collective, large-scale and impersonal. It is a realm of uniformity rather than of individual distinction; it imposes "leveling demands," and "conformism [is] inherent in" it. It contrasts with the plurality and distinctness once characteristic of public life: "society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest."27 Society is also the realm of "behavior," and excludes the possibility of action. . . . imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to normalize its members, to make them behave.28

That is why society has made possible statistical social science, which studies the uniformities of behavior that society demands and imposes.29 "Society" has "invaded" and "conquered the public realm," but there is a significant ambiguity about just what this victory means.30 Sometimes we are told that society has "destroyed" the public realm: the public "withers away" until it is about "to disappear altogether."31 At other times the public seems more like a place, which is not destroyed but occupied, as society displaces the former occupant, the political. In this second sense, the public realm need not be political at all, but will house whatever activity a community honors as central and makes the focus of its attention. Thus in some ancient and most medieval cities the public marketplace belonged to the craftsmen and merchants—*homo faber* Arendt calls them—engaging in public "conspicuous produc-
tion." More recently it is man as laborer and consumer, the *animal laborans*, that has "been permitted to occupy the public realm."33

As long as the *animal laborans* remains in possession of it there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open.34

But that is precisely what Arendt means by "society": it is that "curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance."35

The same ambiguity appears in the relationship of social to political. On the one hand, they are incompatible, the political demanding action while the social precludes it. But on the other hand, Arendt also says that the withering away of the public realm leaves behind certain political forms characteristic precisely of society—one almost wants to say "certain nonpolitical political forms." She speaks of the reduction of the political to "a very restricted sphere of government," and the reduction of government in turn to administration. She speaks of bureaucracy as "the most social form of government." She also mentions something like interest-group pressure politics as a "perverted form of 'acting together'" that can only bring to the fore those "who know nothing and can do nothing."36

In *On Revolution*, Arendt is franker about the meaning of society's intrusion on the public, allowing that "the social question" might be spoken of "better and more simply" as "the existence of poverty."37 Crucial to her view is the conviction that prior to our own time, the problem of poverty "could not be solved by political means." Only "the rise of technology and not the rise of modern political ideas" has made the problems of poverty solvable for us.38 To Arendt, these problems are "matters of administration, to be put into the hands of experts, rather than issues which could be settled by the twofold process of decision and persuasion." Accordingly,

No revolution has ever solved the "social question" and... the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads into terror, and that it is terror which sends revolutions to their doom.41

Why is this so? Arendt gives two accounts, one ontological and one psychological or sociological. Ontologically, as we have already seen, economic concerns are by definition opposed to freedom and the capacity for action. Poverty is a "dehumanizing force... because it puts
men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under the absolute dictate of necessity." Thus,

When the poor, driven by the needs of their bodies, burst onto the scene of the French Revolution . . . necessity appeared with them, and the result was that the power of the old regime because impotent and the new republic was stillborn.42

More concretely, it was a particular historical class of people who “appeared on the scene of politics,” and something about them was what ruined politics and aborted the Revolution. “It was people rather than general economic and financial problems that were at stake, and they did not intrude into but burst upon the political domain. Their need was violent, and, as it were, pre-political,” and therefore destructive of politics.

Measured against the immense sufferings of the immense majority of the people, the impartiality of justice and law, the application of the same rules to those who sleep in palaces and those who sleep under the bridges of Paris, was like a mockery.43

This “multitude, appearing for the first time in broad daylight” in the French Revolution, “was actually the multitude of the poor and the downtrodden, whom every century before had hidden in darkness and shame,” in the privacy of the household. The public realm was now to “offer its space and light to this immense majority who are not free because they are driven by daily needs.”44

Of the ideas that made the Revolution, “the notion and the taste of public liberty” were “the first to disappear,” says Arendt partly quoting Tocqueville, “because they could not withstand the onslaught of wretchedness which the Revolution brought into the open.”45 Once the suffering of the poor “had been exposed” to the public light, what made its appearance “was rage and not virtue,” for “rage is indeed the only form in which misfortune can become active.”46

Thus it seems that for Arendt, because political action cannot solve economic problems, and because misery can become active only in destructive ways, it is best for the poor and the laborers to be kept out of the public sphere. Like women, they belong in the household, with concerns of the body:

From the beginning of history to our own time it has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy. Hidden away were the
laborers who "with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life," and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. . . . The fact that the modern age emancipated the working classes and the women at nearly the same historical moment must certainly be counted among the characteristics of an age which no longer believes that bodily functions and material concerns should be hidden.47

But we know that Arendt believes that material concerns (and bodily functions as well) must be excluded from the public realm; so a passage like this one is bound to make one wonder whether she also has her doubts about the "emancipation" of workers and women. 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"? Impartiality! Justice! Where were these principles when that immense majority was relegated to shame and misery? On this account, the exclusion of "everything merely necessary or useful" from political life means simply the exclusion of the exploited by their exploiters, who can afford not to discuss economics, and to devote themselves to "higher things," because they live off the work of others.

But there is more wrong here than injustice. On this account, I suggest, one cannot even make sense of politics itself; even for those admitted to its benefits, it can be no real benefit. To see what I mean, put two questions to Arendt: What keeps these citizens together as a body? And what is it that they talk about together, in that endless palaver in the agora?

As to what unifies the citizenry, Arendt acknowledges that her concept of public action "stresses the urge toward self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors," and therefore "is highly individualistic."48 Certainly for the Greeks the public realm "was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself," to prove "that he was the best of all."49 But more generally as well, citizenship is characterized by "the conviction that the greatest that man can achieve is his own appearance and actualization."50 Evidently what holds these competitive citizens together is that each needs the others for his audience, as means to his personal end. The polis, Arendt says, "had a twofold function" for the Greeks: it was "supposed to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame,' that is, to multiply the chances for
everybody to distinguish himself”; and, second, it was supposed to “offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech,” to make it more likely that greatness would be permanently remembered.51 “It was for the sake of this chance, and out of love for a body politic that made it possible to them all, that each was more or less willing to share in the burdens . . . of public affairs.”52 Nor, again, is this attitude confined to the Greeks, for when Arendt explicitly asks what “force” keeps citizens together in general, her answer is a traditional and quite offhand invocation of the theory of social contract. Each sees his private advantage in being joined to the others, and therefore binds himself to them by “the force of mutual promise or contract.”53

This is an astonishing teaching for a theorist whose entire doctrine seems in other respects a sustained critique of the utilitarian calculation of self-interest that reduces all things to “the merely necessary or useful,” and particularly of treating human beings as means to one’s private ends, “as one treats other ‘material.’”54 Arendt’s citizens seem no less selfish than any “rational economic man.”

And about what are citizens to talk, in the public realm, as each tries to distinguish himself? Economic concerns are excluded, both ontologically and functionally, because the intrusion of “the social” will destroy true public life. For the Greeks, at least, law-making was excluded as well, for they regarded legislation as a prepolitical task, a kind of “making” analogous to the building of a city wall, usually to be accomplished by a single law-giver who would not even be a citizen using the public edifice he constructed.55 The Greeks deliberated much about warfare; surely that is not what Arendt recommends for us. But then, what does she imagine as the content of political speech and action? And why is this question so difficult to answer from her text?

Economics is to be excluded because it serves the needs of the body, and the body is a threat to human greatness and freedom, an encumbrance that ties us to our animal nature, something shameful to be hidden in private darkness. Public life, by contrast, is the quest for secular immortality, the hope of being remembered after one’s death so that one’s name and fame live on. Yet, given the curious emptiness of content characterizing Arendt’s image of the public sphere, it is hard to see why such immortal fame should be so important and attractive. It is one thing to hope for heavenly immortality, but the earthly immortal fame Arendt has in mind seems no good once one is dead. Why should I care—and care so much—about whether my name and deeds will be remembered after I am dead and gone?
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 that they cannot achieve that goal, require endless reassurance from the others in their anxious delusion.

Yet, can this really be what Arendt means? Why should she so undermine her own effort to save public, political life?

III.

To discover what has gone wrong with Arendt's account of public life and action, compare her ideas to those of Aristotle, on whom she so frequently draws. Clearly, Arendt's identification of the public with the political, of both with action, and of all three with what is distinctively human, derive from Aristotle. "Man is a political animal," Aristotle teaches, a creature that will reach its highest natural capacities only in polis citizenship. Aristotle insists, like Arendt, that politics is a relationship among peers who share in self-government, yet that the equality of citizens also presupposes diversity and plurality among them. Like Arendt, too, he distinguishes action from making, and associates action and politics with freedom; although Aristotle allows for both private action and private freedom. He also distinguishes political from household relations, the latter being concerned with "property" and the "necessary conditions" for "life," while the former is concerned with "the good life," and "virtue." What ultimately distinguishes the political association from tribes, alliances, and other groups is "the spirit of [the members'] intercourse."

All this is much like Arendt's view. But one crucial difference emerges: Aristotle's discussion of public and political life makes almost no mention of the agonal striving to distinguish oneself before one's peers and become immortal. Indeed, if anything, for Aristotle "ambition . . . is dangerous to states" and the outstanding individual is a threat to that equality of peers and "spirit of friendship" on which political "community depends." Aristotle's account, then, does not give rise as Arendt's does to a sense of the citizens' anxiety and egotistical striving.
On the contrary, for Aristotle, what makes political activity valuable, what holds a polis together, and makes the citizens (in Arendt's phrase) "more or less willing to share in the burden . . . of public affairs" is justice. Justice is "the good" that is pursued in politics, and therefore the greatest (human) good and that "which is most pursued." Justice "belongs to the polis," for it is "an ordering of the political association," and "consists in what tends to promote the common interest." The capacity for justice, moreover, helps to distinguish man from the animals; for that capacity is directly tied to Aristotle's two ways of defining man, as a political creature and one characterized by logos—language, speech, rationality. The argument of the Politics in this regard is very condensed but very powerful: the reason why man is a polis creature must be connected to his being a logos creature for "Nature . . . makes nothing in vain." Language "serves to declare what is advantageous and what is the reverse," and therefore also "what is just and what is unjust." Thus, man alone among the animals "possesses a perception of good and evil, of the just and the unjust, and of other similar qualities; and it is association in [a common perception of] these things which makes a family and a polis." The idea of justice, central for Aristotle, is conspicuously absent from Arendt's otherwise closely parallel account. Moreover, for Aristotle, although politics and justice are about right and wrong, morality and virtue, they are also about economic privilege and social power. His accounts, not merely of civil conflict and disorder, but also of the various healthy constitutional forms, are pervaded by consideration of wealth, status, and class relationships. Economics is involved in the preconditions for civic membership, for political stability, for particular constitutional forms; and in the consequences of any political act. Obviously wealth is not the point or purpose of politics, but it certainly is a continuing issue in political life; and justice cannot help but take economic considerations into account.

IV.

For a political theorist of her stature and range, Hannah Arendt had remarkably little to say about justice. Certainly she did not, like Aristotle, place the concept at the center of her political thought; indeed, in her works of abstract political theory she rarely used the word. This is not because she opposed justice or thought it trivial; but because she
was so determined to save the public realm and political freedom. If justice were permitted into—let alone made central to—public, political life, she feared it would bring with it the dangerous economic and social concerns, the hungry and passionate poor who would destroy what was to be saved.

In terms of the typology introduced earlier, Arendt's basic concern was clearly the third dimension, in its substantive rather than merely formal aspect: the shared self-government of a free community, the *bios politikos*. But to protect it, she felt constrained to sever it from the second dimension, from the economic and social conditions structuring citizens' lives, in which they have something at stake. The public must be valued for itself, not degraded into a mere means to some lesser end. As Tocqueville said, "Who asks of freedom anything beyond itself, is born to be a slave." Yet as a result, Arendt often sounded as if her only concern were with the first dimension of publicness: with publicity, the competitive striving for a memorable public image. Therefore, her way of trying to protect and revive the public succeeds only in making its real value incomprehensible to us. In particular, by banishing justice from her political vision, Arendt denied herself what might well be the most powerful weapon in her cause.

The irony is most visible with regard to her concept of action. As the public realm is threatened by the social, so action is threatened by a pair of inappropriate attitudes or states of mind, both connected with the social: the attitudes of expedient utility, and of "process" thinking.

A concern for expedient utility characterizes the mentality of *homo faber*. It is an attitude of technical efficiency, the practical search for the best means to a preconceived end. Applied to human affairs and action, it disposes us to see and treat each other as objects, means to our private ends. Technical thinking makes us concentrate on the means; it narrows our vision so that we forget our responsibility for the ends, the need to deliberate about ends with our fellow actors. This outlook tends to be reductionist and to destroy meaning, symbolic significance, and human relationships, leaving our lives hollow.

The other attitude inappropriate to action, "process" thinking, is the mentality of the *animal laborans*. It is essentially the conviction that we are the helpless products of causal forces, historical or social, which leave us no choice or capacity for initiative. Its danger to action and politics is obvious: it renders us passive, oblivious to both our options and our responsibilities. If the technical mentality is associated with "rational economic man" and the profit motive, with the interest-dominated politics of "who gets what, when, where, and how," then
"process" thinking is associated with Marxian economic determinism and with totalitarianism, the readiness to sacrifice millions in the name of historical necessity. So for Arendt, these patterns of thought inappropriate to action are linked with economics and the social question, with the need for alternatives to both communist dictatorship and interest-group liberalism.

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, 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.67

Arendt meant to call us from process and expediency 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."68 But besides being obscure, this way of conceptualizing action is self-defeating. For, in the first place, action connected to nothing that precedes or follows it seems pointless and arbitrary. And, in the second place, the appeal to heroism and glory unconnected to any standard of right transcending the individual is bound to produce at best empty posturing, at worst, violence and war.

Nothing could be further from Arendt's intentions. She explicitly disparaged trivial and vain self-display.69 Anyone who consciously strives to create a certain self-image is bound to fail; and any society in which this is a widespread motive becomes incapable of public life.70 Where all are engaged in propagandizing each other, none can trust what another says, so that the "revelatory" power of speech is lost.71 Despite indications to the contrary, Arendt really was after self-development and not self-display; her goal was the "actualization" or making "patent" of the actor's "latent self."72 She was, moreover, aware that all human beings, even the poor, are capable of action and citizenship.73 Accordingly, she herself occasionally acknowledged that "forcing one part of humanity into the darkness of pain and necessity" so that another part might be free is a "violent injustice," and that at least some of the leaders of the French Revolution acted out of a "deeply and constantly frustrated sense of justice."74

Nor can Arendt have been as hostile to the body and the household, to "women's concerns," as she often seemed; after all, she located her major study within a framework of solicitude for the body of our
“Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky,” worry lest through our science we import “cosmic processes” into “terrestrial . . . nature even at the obvious risk of destroying her.”

Nor can Arendt have failed to know that politics has always dealt importantly with social and economic matters, even in the polis. Indeed, she insisted that the public realm will only be stable if citizens are related to each other by some tangible subject-matter, “the objects—the buildings and tools and artifacts . . . that make up our world.” Through these objects, which after all constitute wealth and the means of production, though Arendt does not say so, the public realm “gathers us together” in an ordered way, “prevents our falling all over each other, so to speak.” This world of things in which we have interest is a tangible in-between (inter-esse) relating “those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it.” Far from being threatened by worldly concerns and interests, the public realm requires them, and “most” action is in fact “about some worldly objective reality,” some interest.

Perhaps, then, it is not a particular subject-matter, nor a particular class of people, but a particular attitude against which the public realm must be guarded—Aristotle might say an inappropriate “spirit of intercourse.” Perhaps a “laborer” is to be identified not by his manner of producing nor by his poverty but by his “process”-oriented outlook; perhaps he is “driven by necessity” not objectively, but because he regards himself as driven, incapable of action. There is considerable evidence for such a reading in the texts. Arendt was aware that “the social” was brought into the public realm less by the “driven” poor than by their well-fed leaders, motivated by pity, and by the bourgeoisie, motivated by anxiety and greed. And the poor themselves became politically active not when most driven by objective necessity, but precisely when they came to see their suffering as actionable, as the bounds of necessity receded. That is why the same popular societies in the French Revolution that made “violent demands” for the “means of subsistence” and for “happiness” were nevertheless also genuine “manifestations of freedom and public spirit,” pioneering “a new type of political organization” that might permit the common people to become “participators in government.”

V.

No account of politics or the public can be right that wholly empties them of substantive content, of what is at stake. No such account can
display their potential seriousness and value to us, nor correctly tell us what they are. Political life is not some leisure-time sport for aristocrats, in which they may cultivate their honor and display their prowess. It is the activity through which relatively large and permanent groups of people determine what they will collectively do, settle how they will live together, and decide their future, to whatever extent that is within human power. Public life in this sense is of the utmost seriousness and importance, and potentially of surpassing glory. But it never occurs in the abstract, without content; it always affects the lives of real people.

Yet Arendt is surely right to fear the destruction of political freedom in our time, and to link that danger to our ways of thinking about public life. So our task becomes finding a way to conceptualize the public that recognizes its roots in human need and its consequences for power, privilege, and suffering, without incurring the dangers Arendt fears. Could one, for instance, acknowledge the centrality of economic and social issues in public life without reducing political freedom to either mere competitive maneuvering for private profit or a mere by-product of some inevitable social process? The concept of justice, it seems to me, would be central to such a theoretical task, for justice is precisely about the connections between profit and right, utility and meaning, private claim and public policy.

Let me try to sketch such an alternative way of thinking, tangent at many points to Arendt's account. Human beings are, more than any other species, the products of their society. Because we are born more helpless, less developed than any other animal, the way we develop depends more on our environment than is true of any other animal. Because we are tool-using animals that work extensively on our world, and because we are language-using animals that not only communicate but conceptualize abstractly, the "environment" that so profoundly conditions our development also varies greatly from one society to another, and from one era of history to another. I am far more different from a woman of ancient Egypt, for instance, than my cat is different from her cat. We are the creatures of culture.

But since the culture that shapes us is itself made and changed by human beings (indeed, the nonmaterial culture simply consists in the activity of its members), we are also the creators of culture. That, of course, is what is meant by the claim that "man makes himself." All species produce their offspring and thereby the species, but human beings also produce a large part of the conditions that shape them. Most of the time, in most aspects of life, we produce those conditions only as unintended by-products of whatever we are engaged in doing. Each of us
has a private life with its own needs and purposes, and out of the uncontrolled intersection of millions of such lives, social conditions and historical process emerge. Occasionally, we try as individuals to think publicly, to adapt our private actions to the larger patterns we see in our society. But we know that for most of us these private, isolated acts will make no difference. Of course we are not all equally powerless in our privacy; there is such a thing as private power, and in some societies it can be very great indeed. But it is directed toward private, partial goals, and remains uncoordinated with other powers and interests. When private power becomes sufficiently great, it may even outweigh and control the formally defined public realm, in effect making policy for the whole society in the private interest and under the control of a few.

To be sure, power that is formally public may also be exercised by a few in the interest of some part of society. What distinguishes public life is the potential for decisions made not merely in the name of the whole community but actually by that community collectively, through participatory political action, and in the common interest. What distinguishes public life, then, is not that it has important substantive consequences for many people; for that could be true of large-scale private power, or economic activity, or childrearing practices. What distinguishes politics, as Arendt and Aristotle said, is action—the possibility of a shared, collective, deliberate, active intervention in our fate, in what would otherwise be the by-product of private decisions. Only in public life can we jointly, as a community, exercise the human capacity “to think what we are doing,” and take charge of the history in which we are all constantly engaged by drift and inadvertence.81

Not all societies have a public life in this sense. Most aspects of social life are left to evolve through drift and private power. Many activities probably can be successfully conducted only in that way. But the distinctive promise of political freedom remains the possibility of genuine collective action, an entire community consciously and jointly shaping its policy, its way of life. From this perspective, to say that we are political animals is to say that we have the power to take charge of the forces which shape and limit us, and that our full development as human beings depends on our exercising that power. Only citizenship enables us jointly to take charge of and take responsibility for the social forces that otherwise dominate our lives and limit our options, even though we produce them. A family or other private association can inculcate principles of justice shared in a community, but only in public citizenship can we jointly take charge of and responsibility for those principles.
Kant suggests something analogous in his conception of moral autonomy: that we are not mature as moral actors until we have become self-governing, have learned to take responsibility not only for our actions but also for the norms and principles according to which we act. As long as we live only by habit or tradition, unaware that they mask an implicit choice, there is something about ourselves as actors in the world that we are not seeing and for which we are not acknowledging our responsibility.

Kant even speaks of “law-making” here, but he is speaking metaphorically. We can make laws or rules for ourselves privately, just as we can invent private languages; but only because there are already such things as rules and words, such activities as rule-making and speaking, which are initially and primarily interpersonal. Aristotelian citizenship goes beyond Kant’s concept of moral autonomy: it is concerned not merely with metaphorical legislation enacted by the individual, but with the actual experience of making, applying, and changing the norms by which the community lives through public deliberation, debate, and action.

This is the experience that teaches us justice and political judgment. Here what must be learned is not merely mutuality—that I am one person among many others like myself—but also how to make general rules and policies with others who have distinctive views and interests. What is at stake here are not merely hypothetical general maxims, but actual rules and policies which others will enforce and under which we shall all live. It is not just a matter here, as in becoming a moral agent, of relating “I” to “you” or even “I” to “thou,” but of relating “I” to “we,” in a context where many other selves also have claims on that “we”—not just claims I must consider as I legislate, but claims to share equally with me in legislating. In the process, I learn not only about the others, and thus about our collectivity, but also about my own personal stake in that collectivity, my stake in being a member of it and in the conditions of my membership. And I learn these in a context of responsibility, not in abstract thought, but in action which will have broad and tangible consequences.

And yet the responsibility is, and must be, shared. Unlike the metaphorical legislation of Kantian morality, political action must look not only to rightness but also to effectiveness and can in general be right only if it is also effective. In public life, rightness and expedience are inextricably intertwined. Of course, politics is competitive and conflictual and has consequences for the relative benefits and burdens of different members of the community. The settling of such conflicts is
what politics is for and what it is about. But of course politics is also about defining relative status and power and privilege, which also defines the nature of our community and the norms and principles by which we shall live. In deciding the perennial political question, "What shall we do?" we are inevitably deciding at the same time both what each of us will get, and who we, as a community, will be.

So Arendt is right: the self is very much at stake in public life, and a narrow concern for expediency and profit will miss the most important consideration of all. Human greatness and glory—and justice—do find their ultimate locus in the public realm. But my fellow citizens are less an audience before whom I try to present a memorable image of self, than fellow actors in collective self-definition, determining along with me not our image but who we shall be, for what we shall stand.

But citizenship and public life cannot do these things unless there are real interests at stake in them, unless the consequences of what we do there really matter to us, and unless we are very much aware of those interests and consequences. We cannot even begin to direct the drift of social forces unless we see those forces truly and deliberate about them in our public forums. Insofar as the polis citizen did not really see the slaves and women around him, did not count them as persons like himself, he did not know himself or his community well, and he was not just. Our public life is an empty form—at best a meaningless diversion for a few, at worst a hateful, hypocritical mask for privilege—unless it actively engages the unplanned drift and the private social power that shape peoples' lives. As we learned from the difficulties of Arendt's thought, the appeal to heroism for its own sake becomes trivial vanity, just as greed and need untransformed by considerations of justice and community become debilitating and dangerous. 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.

What we need here is not separation but linkage. It is the connection that matters, the transformation of social conditions into political issues, of need and interest into principle and justice. Far from excluding the social question as unworthy of political life, we need to make it political in order to render it amenable to human action and direction. The danger to public life comes not from letting the social question in, but from failing to transform it in political activity, letting it enter in the wrong "spirit."
That is not a goal to be achieved once and for all, but an endless, lifelong task; what makes us human is the activity itself, not its goal. What matters is learning to make and repeatedly making the transition from private to public, from the narrow self to shared membership in the community.

Now, it is precisely justice and concepts like it, banished by Arendt, because they tie morality up with expediency, that enable us to make this transition from private to public, from “I” to “we.” Let us look briefly at just two forms that this transition by way of justice can take, one that might be regarded as a safeguard against the dangers of technical expediency and utility, the other as a remedy for process thinking and apathy.

The first outlook, the mentality of homo faber, characterizes us when we come to politics with our private interest firmly in hand, seeking by any means necessary to get as much as we can out of the system. It is a common condition, for the private is immediately visible in our daily lives and face-to-face relationships. But actual participation in political action, deliberation, and conflict may make us aware of our more remote and indirect connections with others, the long-range and large-scale significance of what we want and are doing. Drawn into public life by personal need, fear, ambition or interest, we are there forced to acknowledge the power of others and appeal to their standards, even as we try to get them to acknowledge our power and standards. We are forced to find or create a common language of purposes and aspirations, not merely to clothe our private outlook in public disguise, but to become aware ourselves of its public meaning. We are forced, as Joseph Tussman has put it, to transform “I want” into “I am entitled to,” a claim that becomes negotiable by public standards. In the process, we learn to think about the standards themselves, about our stake in the existence of standards, of justice, of our community, even of our opponents and enemies in the community; so that afterwards we are changed. Economic man becomes a citizen.

The second version of the transition concerns the alienated and apathetic oppressed, who do not approach politics with their self-interest firmly in hand, but suffer in private, perhaps seething with a diffuse resentment directed as much against themselves as anyone else. Theirs is the sort of transformation to which C. Wright Mills alludes: what had been accepted as personal trouble comes to be seen as an
actionable public issue, a matter of justice. Here we find the housewife who learns for the first time that she is not alone in her misery and boredom, that what troubles her is part of a social structure that can be altered. Here also we find the poor, who, as in the French Revolution, may come to see their situation as a human rather than solely natural product, as imposed and changeable and therefore unjust. They become, as we say, politicized. Their inarticulate and perhaps even unexpressed private "No!" becomes a claim: "No one should be treated like this!" The transformation releases passion, as Arendt feared, but it also enlists passion in the cause of principle, of justice, of the community.

In both these patterns of transition we discover connections to others and learn to care about those connections, learn how what we already cared about is embedded in social relationships. And so we discover the value to us of our public institutions, of justice and principle, of mutuality and political action. In the process we learn that we are different than we had thought, that our interests are different than we had supposed. We discover the way our membership helps to define us, and the pleasure of becoming active in relation to it together with others. We learn not only that one can use claims of justice for private advantage, but also and more importantly that we ourselves need impartial justice, that what counts as profit and loss, what counts as part of ourselves, depends on our membership, on whom we call "we" and what we call "just."

In a way, political theory has always been concerned with this transition from private to public, and the relationship between personal and political. Whether in Plato's great analogy between polity and psyche, or in the various versions of contract theory and utilitarianism, or in Hegel's and Marx's efforts at dialectical formulation, the problem is always: How shall we understand ourselves as simultaneously both private and public beings? Most past accounts, it seems to me, sound either like selfishness writ large, or like appeals to dutiful self-sacrifice, occasionally like both at once, in contradiction. I am not able to give a better account, but the road toward one surely goes by way of conceptions of what a person is. Surely the right account must be about neither self-interest nor self-sacrifice, but the self-realization of a not yet completed person—self realization in both senses of that word: making actual what is potential in the person and coming to realize who one really is.
Accurate self-knowledge and responsible self-government have been the dual aspects of human maturity at least since the Greeks. To be grown up means to understand who you are and what you are doing, and to take responsibility for it competently. Since we are all in fact members of one another, connected to others through the conditions and consequences of our actions in countless ways, being grown up means knowing those connections and taking responsibility for the consequences. Only in interaction with many and diverse others, only in relation to the "we," can we gain that knowledge in a determinate way or make that assumption of responsibility effective. I cannot fully discover who I am, learn public judgment, in exclusively private relationships. And I am not yet fully taking charge of my life and of what I am doing, until I join with my fellow-citizens in political action.

Of course, that option is not always open to us. A public life is not to be had simply for the asking. But at least we should know what we are missing in the absence of politics, and of what we are depriving those whom we exclude from public life. Nor should we underestimate the human hunger for justice. It is more powerful than any physical hunger, and endlessly resilient.

NOTES

3. A realm is a kingdom, and we have the right to expect of it a monarch with subjects, a territory with borders. A domain has a master to head the household. A sector has been cut from some larger whole, usually circular in form; a sphere is a ball, a physical object in space. All these locutions suggest a clarity and fixity of boundaries, a mutual exclusiveness of content, that is highly misleading.
10. Ibid., p. 30.
11. Ibid., p. 29.
12. Ibid., pp. 28, 30, 62. She ignores the extent to which death in battle, and the naked body in athletics, were eminently public for the Greeks.

13. Ibid., p. 37.


15. Freedom is contrasted sometimes to necessity (Human Condition, pp. 31, 41, 71), sometimes to liberation (ibid., p. 30; On Revolution, pp. 22-25, 220-221). Action is not subject to moral standards (Human Condition, p. 205), yet involves forgiveness and promising, which seem more personal than political (ibid., pp. 240-243).


17. Ibid., p. 176.

18. Ibid., p. 179; also p. 177.

19. Ibid., pp. 180, 186, 210-1.


21. Ibid., pp. 210, 41.

22. Arendt, On Revolution, pp. 115-6, quoting John Adams, Discourses on Davila, Works (Boston, 1851) VI, 232-3. Adams, in turn, drew his passage on the passion for distinction from Adam Smith, for whom it had almost nothing to do with what Arendt meant by the public.


24. Ibid., p. 59; also pp. 51, 199, 208.


28. Ibid., p. 40.

29. Ibid., p. 42.


32. Ibid., pp. 46, 59, 159-161.


34. Ibid., pp. 134, 33, 160.

35. Ibid., p. 35.

36. Ibid., pp. 40, 60, 203; also pp. 28-29.


38. Ibid., p. 86.

39. Ibid., p. 110.

40. Ibid., p. 86.

41. Ibid., p. 108.

42. Ibid., p. 54.

43. Ibid., p. 86.

44. Ibid., p. 41.

45. Ibid., pp. 248-249.

46. Ibid., p. 106, my emphasis.

47. Arendt, Human Condition, pp. 72-73.

48. Ibid., p. 194.

49. Ibid., p. 41.


51. Ibid., p. 197.
52. Ibid., p. 41.
53. Ibid., p. 245.
54. Ibid., p. 188.
55. Ibid., pp. 63-64, 196. But the Greek idea of law was closer to our notion of a constitution; our idea of legislation closer to their notion of a decree.
58. Aristotle, Politics, p. 10; idem., Ethics, p. 173. Private freedom is a “mean conception,” he says, while public action is “dignified,” “majestic”; idem., Politics, pp. 258, 288, 18.
60. Aristotle, Politics, p. 119.
61. Ibid., pp. 181, 134-136, 208; if he is not ostracized, he should be made king, but his excellence will undermine the peer-equality essential to a polis.
63. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
64. The concept does appear, although it is not examined, in Eichmann in Jerusalem (New York: Viking, 1964)
67. Arendt is thus forced into tortured and tortuous locutions; e.g., Ibid., pp. 9-11, 95, 177, 183, 233, 241.
68. Ibid., p. 206.
69. Ibid., pp. 55-56.
70. Ibid., p. 179.
72. Ibid., p. 208, and p. 175, the epigraph from Dante.
73. Ibid., p. 5.
74. Ibid., p. 119; Arendt, On Revolution, p. 224.
76. Ibid., p. 182; pp. 31, 52-53.
77. E.g., ibid., pp. 46, 83n, 199, 255, 322.
80. Ibid., pp. 245-248; cf. pp. 218-219 on the early labor movement.
81. Arendt, Human Condition, p. 5.
83. Ibid., p. 186.

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