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Relational Plurality as a Corrective to Liberal Atomistic Pluralism

Abstract:

This essay argues for a concept of political identity that is fundamentally *relational* in nature contra more liberal accounts of identity that are atomistic. I consider John Rawls' account of political identity in his *Political Liberalism* and provide a response stemming from Hannah Arendt's account of political identity grounded in the existential condition of politics: human plurality. Using her concept of human plurality, I argue that political identity ought to be conceived as *relationally individuated* as opposed to *atomistically so*, meaning that our identities only emerge in and through appearing before other political actors and not prior to it. The larger upshot is that conceiving of political identity as relational provides a more fruitful concept of the citizen and might allow progress to be made regarding some of the more entrenched political problems in American political culture, especially polarization and partisanship.

Keywords:

identity, liberalism, plurality, Hannah Arendt, political

I. Introduction

Political *culture* is thought of as the way in which culture influences politics, or put more precisely, how the prevailing and dominant attitudes of a particular people have an effect on the ways in which citizens interact with each other and their government. Specifically, political culture is thought of as a set of values and norms that inform the way citizens conceive of themselves in relation to their political system. American political

culture traces many of its values to its historical founding, especially as it relates to the supposed *individual* rights and liberties that were gained during the Revolution. These rights and liberties are thought to apply in two contexts: the right and liberty of a country to govern *itself* and the right and liberty of an individual to do the same. This American *individualism*, at the heart of American political culture is ultimately, I argue, problematic insofar as it leads citizens to conceive of themselves *as* metaphysically individuated, sovereign creatures, that is, without relation to or dependence on others. Such individualism within American political culture can be used to explain the extreme levels of polarization and partisanship that characterize contemporary American political attitudes and beliefs. I argue this self-conception traces its roots to liberal political thought.

Given this background and context and considering the theme of relation for this issue, I will examine this concept from the perspective of the political and how individuals are conceived of in relation to other individuals within political theory, and in particular, I seek to challenge what I will refer to as an atomistic conception of the person found largely in liberal political thought. I will use Hannah Arendt's thought on human plurality to challenge such a conception. In *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls – perhaps the most well-known representative of liberalism in the twentieth century – expands his political theory to include the assumption that the citizenry in contemporary democratic societies is composed of a plurality of worldviews. So that one's particular worldview does not attempt to claim itself as *the* privileged position, a liberal practice of tolerance ought to be practiced as far as possible. For Rawls, this "fact of plurality" results in the bracketing of any comprehensive doctrines within the political sphere and seems so obviously true within contemporary liberal societies that one does not need to argue for it so much as assume it as a starting point for theorizing the political.

In this essay, I argue that Rawls's liberal concept of pluralism traces its origins to conceptions of the person in modern political theory, including the notion that human beings are *individuated* creatures.¹ Though "liberal" political theory has undergone many developments since the rudiments of such a theory emerged in modern social contract theory, the Rawlsian desire to respect and tolerate a plurality of opinions is premised upon the same picture of the human being *as individuated*. My contention is that an individuated conception is flawed because such individuation is only possible because of and presupposes a prior appearance to others. In other words, we are *relationally* individuated and not atomistically so.² Thus, not only must political

1) As an astute editor at *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* has brought to my attention, it is not as though modern political philosophers are somehow *responsible* for this atomistic ontology of human beings and I do not want to give that impression. This editor writes, "These political philosophers were more an effect than a cause of it and were merely describing and responding to the rupturing of social relations that had been occurring already for several centuries throughout Europe, reaching its peak in the 17th century. Writers of that time, including Shakespeare, Dunne, and Spencer, described their societies as all in 'atoms.' The Reformation, too, played a significant role in this development." I am not suggesting they created this ontology themselves but I am suggesting that insofar as political philosophy, either implicitly or explicitly, informs citizens' conception of themselves, then political philosophers are in some sense responsible for this atomistic conception of human beings. For example, many citizens in the American context conceive of themselves as "rights bearing individuals," which can arguably be traced to the writings of Locke and so while it may be true that Locke was simply responding to the social environment of his time in thinking of human beings in this way, his writing nonetheless has a deep influence on Americans' conception of themselves.

2) Similarly, an editor at *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* has importantly reminded me that, regarding the argument that human beings are fundamentally defined by their relations with each other, there are rich traditions outside of the European canon that think of human being this way. Native American and African traditions in particular have long considered human beings as fundamentally dependent and relational creatures as opposed to the image of competing atomistic individuals. Thus, Arendt's claims about plurality can be thought of as similar in this regard. Insofar as this essay is concerned with thinking about how citizens in liberal states think of themselves in relation to other citizens, I am arguing Arendt's thought provides us with some relief against more atomistic conceptions that we find in liberal political theory. Nonetheless, on a broader scale, considering the rich array of traditions that regard human beings as fundamentally relational creatures is important so that we do not remain confined to only European traditions.

actors tolerate differing perspectives and identities, but to even tolerate a distinct political identity, one needs to be seen and heard by others in order to be recognized *as distinct in the first place*; because of this dependence upon being seen and heard by others, I argue that Arendt's concept of political identity is fundamentally a relational one.

Though communitarian thinkers like Michael Sandel,³ feminist thinkers like Virginia Held, and other schools of philosophical thought have challenged liberalism on this score for decades, I approach the problem from Hannah Arendt's recognition of plurality as the existential, political condition of human beings – to the fact, as she states “that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”⁴ My goal is to challenge liberal pluralism from two angles arguing that (1) an individuated conception of the human being results in a flawed notion of political identity and (2) that pluralism is heralded as a *value* instead of as a *condition* of our very existence.

II. Contract Theory, Rawls, Pluralism, and Political Identity

The political theory of modernity is social contract theory, postulating human beings in a pre-political condition known as the state of nature. Though varying conceptions of such a condition exist, the assumption is that human beings need to leave it behind because of various difficulties inherent in it. At the more extreme end of the spectrum, such difficulties include the Hobbesian desire to remain alive whereas there is the more familiar Lockean desire to have one's natural right to property protected. Regardless of the reason for leaving the state of nature, what is offered in this picture about man's nature is a self-interested, autonomous creature seeking self-preservation through the aid of some type of political arrangement. Indeed, self-preservation as the reason for leaving the state of nature is the same motivation shared by many modern thinkers. Though each argues differently about what is meant by *self-preservation*, the concept operative within such attempts is quite similar, that is, political life becomes about the protection of an individual's right to survive against threats to her life or liberty. Though political theory has dispensed with trying to describe what man must be

3) See Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* and Held, *The Ethics of Care*, especially chapters 4 and 5.

As an anonymous reviewer for *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* has brought to my attention, beyond the two prominent critiques of Rawls I mention above, there are numerous critiques of liberalism, potentially too many to list here. However, two others worth mentioning are Chantal Mouffe, who, in her numerous writings, has disclosed some internal difficulties of the liberal tradition, especially in Rawls' concept of the political sphere. Similarly, in Paul Ricoeur's work on Rawls, one can find an interesting attempt to combine some aspects of Rawls' concept of justice with an Aristotelian concept of practical reason. See Ricoeur, *The Just*.

Arendt, in her own theory of judgment developed near the end of her life and never completed, also relies upon Aristotle's theory of praxis and integrates elements of it into her own view of judgment; however, her own theory of judgment relies more on Kant's than Aristotle. Thus, this is an affinity she shares with Ricoeur, broadly speaking, but Arendt herself never directly engages with Rawls' work in the way Ricoeur does. My own project in this essay is focused more on plurality as the existential ground of politics rather than attempting to locate affinities or overlap between Arendt and Rawls, though they do share some nonetheless insofar as they are both concerned with the public space or public sphere.

Arendt's work is closer to Mouffe insofar as the latter focuses upon what she refers to as agonistic politics. In numerous works, Mouffe develops this concept of politics against what she sees as an overly rational, individualistic liberal political theory. In this spirit, my work in this essay is very much in line with Mouffe while nonetheless acknowledging that Arendt's concept of plurality recognizes *distinctness* and *equality* as the two fundamental existential features of politics. In Arendt's terms, I see Mouffe as focused upon the distinctness of human plurality as that which makes democratic politics fundamentally agonistic and to this extent, she has important overlap with Arendt. I nonetheless would suggest that my own project in this essay diverges from Mouffe to the extent that I am claiming that Arendt's politics is *existential*. For an excellent sample of Mouffe's views, see Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” There are other books and essays on this general topic by Mouffe, but too many to list here.

4) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

like “by nature,” Rawlsian political theory retains an idealist move. That is, in order to gauge the best arrangement of political life, similar to contract theory, Rawls abstracts from the particular contingent facts about individuals so that the arrangement is as fair and just as possible. Though Rawls does abstract from these particularities and contingencies, he differs from his modern predecessors in recognizing the value of what he calls “the fact of pluralism.” We are not left, then, with the self-same individuals inhabiting the modern state of nature, but instead, Rawls gives a face to these individuals as necessarily holding innumerable worldviews or what he refers to as comprehensive doctrines. Rawls states: “The fact of reasonable pluralism... means that the differences between citizens arising from their comprehensive doctrines, religious and non-religious are irreconcilable.”⁵

Moreover, the acknowledgment of this fact of reasonable pluralism led Rawls to reformulate his political project so that he could take account of it. This reconsideration of pluralism resulted in his work *Political Liberalism*, an updated formulation of his political theory laid out in his earlier work, *A Theory of Justice*. As Rawls writes, “Thus, a main aim of *PL* is to show that the idea of a well ordered society in *Theory* may be reformulated so as to take account of the fact of reasonable pluralism.”⁶ Thus, reasonable pluralism, as an enduring feature of democratic societies, must be reckoned with so that political theory can do justice to the political reality of contemporary states. The question I have is: *How* does Rawls reckon with pluralism? What does it mean when Rawls states that he needs “to take account of the fact of reasonable pluralism?” In examining these questions, we seek to discover the problem that, despite Rawls’s reformulation of his project, nevertheless persists.

In contrast to the political thought of Arendt, Rawls does not embrace the inevitably plural nature of democratic politics, but finds ways to theorize around it so that it does not interfere with the workings of a “well ordered society.” Grounding reasonable pluralism in the language of “comprehensive irreconcilable doctrines” portends how Rawls accounts for it, that is, given the very nature of a worldview *as* comprehensive, the worry is that offering such claims in the political sphere cuts off debate. Rawls is attempting to circumscribe what can count as legitimate debate by excluding moral claims about what type of life one ought to pursue. These are not, properly speaking, things that belong amongst the topics of shared debate in the public sphere. Zerilli summarizes the difference between Arendt and Rawls: “By contrast with Arendt, who also worries about the dogmatic character of certain kinds of truth claims and their potentially destructive character effects on the public realm, Rawls ends up shrinking this realm to the point of insignificance in the name of saving it.”⁷ In other words, Rawls introduces pluralism only as something that sets limits to political debate and not, as Arendt recognizes, the existential ground for thinking about politics.

In sum, Rawls’s recognition of plurality as something he must account for in order to amend his political theory leaves me wanting: Why insist plurality must be accounted for only to suggest its very recognition *means it must be bracketed*? My contention is that Rawls’s insistence upon bracketing comprehensive doctrines arises from a flawed conception of political identity. In other words, even while giving voice to the empirical reality of plural worldviews, Rawls retains the model of political identity his modern predecessors held. In order to appreciate plurality, it must be re-thought *not* as a source of conflicting worldviews, but as the existential ground of our political identities. In other words, with Arendt, pluralism must be premised upon *relational* individuals and not atomistic ones.

5) Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xlvi.

6) *Ibid.*, xliii.

7) Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 161.

III. Getting to a Performative Concept of Political Identity

Before turning to Arendt to think of political identity as performed, I will sketch the conception of political identity that I see as problematic. My claim is that political identity, according to liberal political theory, is thought of as pre-given instead of something emergent through one's speech or appearance before others.

That one *holds* or espouses political opinions calls to mind the image of a fully formed political identity functioning as a repository of opinions about the world that can be culled at the appropriate moments. In simultaneously discussing how persons think of themselves as free and attempting to distance himself from a metaphysical conception of the person, Rawls writes: "A second respect in which citizens view themselves as free is that they regard themselves as *self-authenticating sources of valid claims*. That is, they regard themselves as being entitled to make claims on their institutions so as to advance their conceptions of the good."⁸ Though Rawls insists that in describing citizens as free in this way he is not implying a metaphysical conception of the person in the vein of a Kantian autonomous agent, he cannot escape this problem if he retains a notion of identity that is "self-authenticating." In other words, though the claim may originate from the agent in the first place (and I take it this is what Rawls means by "self-authenticating") what do we gain by thinking of *political identity* in this manner? What is the *meaning* of the claim, and does it solely lie in the fact that it originated from an agent? Perhaps this distinction is not immediately clear: instead of regarding political speech or action as meaningful because it emerges from an unencumbered self who is the source of claims, I insist, with Arendt, political action is meaningful through its performance. In other words, as opposed to seeing political action as meaningful because of its source as in the case of the Rawlsian citizen, we gain meaning from action through its performance. Turning to Arendt's essay "What is Freedom?" can help us understand this distinction.

In this essay, Arendt seeks to challenge the moral and political traditions' conception of freedom as either freedom of the will or as negative liberty. For her, one of the most egregious errors in the history of philosophy in general and political thought in particular has been to divorce the concept of freedom from the realm of politics: "the philosophical tradition... has distorted, instead of clarifying, the very idea of freedom such as it is given in human experience by transposing it from its original field, the realm of politics and human affairs in general, to an inward domain, the will, where it would be open to self-inspection."⁹ The point that Arendt is making is that there is no *experience* of freedom through philosophical introspection, that is, in attempting to ascertain freedom of the will. Moreover, in Arendt there is a fundamental connection between freedom and action because freedom is *how* action appears in the world, that is, freedom is the manifestation of our capacity for action.

Thus, if freedom is how action manifests itself, Arendt's concept of freedom allows us to get at the *experience* of action because we must focus on the performance of freedom, not on the motive which produces it or the consequences that result from it. Arendt explicitly makes the connection between freedom, action, and performance: "the appearance of freedom... coincides with the performing act. Men *are* free – as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom – as long as they act, neither before nor after; *for to be free and to act are the same*."¹⁰ The performance of action gets us to the experiential notion of politics and we cannot see this if we follow Rawls's thinking on freedom in terms of the self-authenticating claims of liberal subjects.

The last section of this essay will draw together several Arendtian concepts in order to sketch more fully what I have in mind by a performative concept of political identity. We must draw out the internal connections between human plurality, action, and performance

8) Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 32 (italics mine).

9) Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 144.

10) *Ibid.*, 151 (emphasis added to last line).

IV. Political Identity as Performed

To more fully sketch what political identity *as* performed looks like, I begin from the Arendtian ground of the political: human plurality. In Arendt's specific words, "Action... corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."¹¹ To claim that *men* inhabit the world is decidedly different from what most in the tradition of political philosophy have claimed.¹² To Arendt, many thinkers in this tradition have dealt with "man" or "mankind" in the abstract. In insisting on the priority of a plurality of individuals, Arendt sees herself as drawing attention to the necessarily political character of human beings' existence. That is, because human beings exist *as* individuals in plurality, they respond to their existence by seeking out ways to distinguish themselves through action. This leads to Arendt's claim that plurality itself has the two general characteristics of equality and distinction. I take the latter of these characteristics to be the most significant because it illuminates most clearly her explicit statement about the plurality of individuals and *not man* inhabiting the earth. That human beings inhabit the earth in a condition of plurality is specifically a description of distinctness.

To claim that people are distinct is to see the necessity of them having the capacities for speech and action. In other words, action or speech is *how* an individual seeks to differentiate herself *as* distinct, a differentiating that is only possible in a plurality of others. Thus, distinctness is not a mere fact of the human condition but requires an *active distinguishing* of the individual from others through action and speech: "Through them [speech and action], men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men."¹³ Distinctness in Arendt is therefore *not* a given, but a possibility of human existence and a moment of action. It is important in this context to clarify, then, that distinctness does not simply make reference to *otherness*, that is, something that might be called "other" simply because it not like something else; to be other than something else is to be different or *not* to be like it. Distinctness in Arendt's sense implies difference, but difference that must be actively expressed through the human capacity for action. Distinctness, then is not, like otherness, merely something that can be read off through observation. Rather, distinctness refers to appearing as such through speech and action and is necessarily *relational* in character.

The significance of this condition of distinctness in "plurality" cannot be overstated in this context because both plurality and distinctness are *spatial* concepts, though not in the regular sense of occupying a spatial position. That is to say, they indicate the space that exists *between* us when individuals speak and act. The existence of "space" in this sense corresponds to the appearance of individuals to one another in speech and action. For this reason, Arendt calls it "the space *of* appearance." Indeed, this "space between us" indicates the truly political nature of the concept of plurality. Canovan indicates this when she writes that "being plural, human beings can gather to form a space amongst themselves, and in that space can see their common world from different points of view... Human beings ... are not simply members of a herd and their plurality makes possible a public space between them."¹⁴

11) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

12) Arendt uses the term "men" throughout her writings, most likely allowing it to do the work of the German term *Menschen*, which does not refer to the male gender. If I follow her in this practice at times, it is because I have not found another way to express the particular philosophical resonance of the prominent and original notion of plurality.

13) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

14) Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 111.

Arendt claims that in addition to distinctness, the condition of plurality has the characteristic of equality. Equality here does not have the resonance of the modern political concept. Rather, equality expresses the condition that if human beings were not in some sense the same, they could neither recognize one another *as* human beings nor understand and communicate with one another. In other words, as a characteristic of plurality, equality is a presupposition of basic human understanding and communication. Hence, individuals are distinct because each of them has a specific identity, but such distinctness is only revealed through action and they are equal because they must be able to understand one another *as* human. Plurality, in brief, is the condition whereby not “man” but human beings inhabit the earth as distinct and equal creatures.

If humans respond to the condition of plurality by setting themselves apart in speech and action, the question now is: what or, rather, who is it that is revealed in appearing before others in this way? What is essential here is Arendt’s claim regarding the “self” that is revealed only in *action* and not prior to it. That is, *who* someone is, as opposed to *what* someone is, can only be revealed through action in appearing before others. I will come to the Arendtian category of “what” someone is below. For now, I emphasize that to appear at all presupposes a plurality of others to whom one can appear in the first place. Thus, if action individuates human beings, such individuation is only possible in the presence of others, and a reader will come to see that this is not the presence of others simply as observers but implies the reception of and response to the speech and action of another, and this is itself constitutive of “the who,” mitigating the potential impression that Arendt’s thought is in the tradition of individualistic political theories. Only within the context of a plurality of other human beings can I appear and reveal “who” I am. “This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore when people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness.”¹⁵ That is to say, “who” someone is lies in the revelation in speech and action that is inseparable from the existential condition of plurality, and plurality *appears* when people are with others in sheer human togetherness. In a sense, the revelation of the “who” realizes the condition of plurality or brings it to life.

To delve further into this distinction between who and what somebody is, we need to examine the connection between speech and action. Hitherto I have simply conjoined the terms in discussing action. Arendt does this too, but the precise connection between action and speech is crucial for understanding the concept of action. Arendt connects the nature of these activities in this way: action belongs more intimately to the phenomenon of beginning and speech to revelation. Action in Arendt is a *new beginning* by which human beings insert themselves into the world and set something into motion that had not previously been a part of the world. However, Arendt repeatedly suggests that action is and can only *be* revelatory if it is accompanied by speech. Speech just is the capacity by which actors reveal *who* they are. Action is new beginning and speech is revelation but without the accompaniment of speech to reveal the actor there could be no action in Arendt’s sense: “Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word.”¹⁶ The close connection between speech and action in Arendt cannot be doubted: action is new beginning but it is only new beginning if it is of human significance, and it is only of human significance if it appears *as* such, which is to say, *if it is the revelation of an actor through speech*.

I now come to the distinction between who and *what* someone is; to grasp just what is at stake in her making this distinction. A reader must understand why it would be problematic to claim that action reveals *what* an individual is as opposed to *who* she is when she acts. To see what is at stake, it is important to get back behind this question – to understand what kind of answers might be given when interrogating what somebody

15) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180.

16) *Ibid.*, 178–79.

is as opposed to who they are. With Arendt, to ask after what-ness at all is to ask after the essential qualities and characteristics of something. Such qualities are attributed to some core underlying subject who *is* these things. That is, there is an underlying self that displays his or her qualities in action, and the self *is* these things prior to or irrespective of action. In other words, the concept of self, presupposed in asking after the what-ness of somebody, is a substantial one, that is, one belonging to the Cartesian category of substance. Of course Descartes distinguished between “thinking” and “extended” substances, but the very invocation of “substance” as a category of human being calls to mind something *in which* properties and qualities are located. Viewed as a “substance,” a self is posited and exists prior to any activity that she undertakes. An implication of this is that a self is a self regardless of how she appears to others. Thus, the concept of the self that emerges with Descartes as a substantial one is more of a *what* than a *who*.¹⁷

At the beginning of the essay, I suggested that I would contest liberal pluralism on two grounds; I will now take up the second of these as I seek to further draw the contrast between pluralism as a value and plurality as the existential ground of politics. I think it is easiest to understand this distinction if we consider one of the most prominent political capacities in Arendt: judgment. Turning to judgment allows us to see how plurality is the existential ground in the formation of judgments.

To readers of Arendt, her turn to Kant for a concept of political judgment based upon his notion of aesthetic judgment is familiar. For Arendt, the feature of aesthetic judgment that makes it political in nature, is its need for the standpoint of others in forming it. Needing to access the standpoints of others in forming political judgments brings human plurality into view: it shows us how, in the absence of determinate concepts, human plurality fills this void. Thus, in contrast to a view of pluralism as a value that ought to be upheld insofar as the very composition of contemporary liberal states gives rise to seemingly innumerable perspectives, from an Arendtian perspective, tolerance of viewpoints different from one’s own is not enough – not only must one tolerate different viewpoints but must also seek to incorporate and weave them into one’s own. Zerilli recognizes the importance of this distinction: “The issue ... is not simply the existence of plural opinions but the capacity to take them into account, to acknowledge them as potentially revealing of something in the world, when forming one’s own opinion or judgment.”¹⁸ This is not a minor point and needs to be emphasized as one of the crucial differences between a more liberal concept of a public space and an Arendtian one. Zerilli’s insistence on taking these standpoints into account means that these perspectives are constitutive of the public space in Arendt. They are not background viewpoints to be tolerated alongside one’s own nor are they viewpoints that exist to merely compete with one’s own as in a clash over whose *right* to their speech is being violated. Rather, the Arendtian public space is composed of a kind of multi-perspectival “world,” according to which each individual views it differently and the sum of each these perspectives *is* the meaning of the political in Arendt.¹⁹ As the Rawlsian liberal public space would have it, human beings exist as isolated creatures whose autonomous perspectives must be tolerated alongside each other, but according to Arendt, perspectives other than one’s own are constitutive of what it means to have a public space and to form a political judgment. This is the meaning of confronting human plurality in the political space – not merely tolerating the variety of

17) Of course there are vast differences in modern philosophy’s conception of the subject depending upon the philosopher under consideration. Allowing for Arendt’s critique of modernity and the “turn to the self” she sees ushered in by a figure like Descartes, I suggest that his concept of the self as a “thinking” substance becomes paradigmatic for the development of modern philosophy, notwithstanding the critiques it drew from subsequent thinkers.

18) Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 141.

19) The concept of “world” has a technical meaning in Arendt, derived in large part from Heidegger’s phenomenological concept. In *The Human Condition* she writes, “It [the world] is related ... to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands... To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common.” (52)

perspectives that arise as a necessary fact of public life. Rather, plurality as the condition of political life needs to be recognized as a requisite condition for having a concept of it at all. Arendt declares that the operation of judgment inherently reflects the condition of plurality: “Judging is one, if not the most, important activity in which ... sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass.”²⁰ If, in judging, one needs to see the world from multiple perspectives, then this is the sense in which one attempts to *be* with others in the world: the very operation of judgment lifts one out of the private condition into contact with those whom one shares a world. Hence, this is the crucial connection between plurality and political action: it is the existential background against which any sense of political action can be thought as meaningful.

To this point, I have attempted to do two things, both of which are inextricably linked: contest liberalism because of the flawed model of political identity it presupposes and remedy this through Arendtian insights about plurality, action, and performance. I will now attempt to offer a clearer exposition of what is meant by a performative notion of political identity. In order to further clarify what I am calling a *performative* concept of political identity, I will draw on Villa’s “Modernity, Alienation, and Critique” for its useful distinction between the *performative* and *expressivist* concepts of self. This distinction between maps onto Arendt’s distinction between *who* and *what* somebody is from *The Human Condition*.

In Villa’s thought on the “who,” Arendt is working with the performative concept where there is no self over and above any action in which it engages as it appears before others. We may identify the expressivist concept as the one that Arendt is trying to distance herself from. Villa explains it as follows: “The expressivist conception of self assumes a core self, a basic essential unity of innate capacities that are expressed, actualized, or concretized in the world of appearances.”²¹ According to this conception, the self is prior to the act as opposed to being coextensive with it. There is a necessary positing of a self who is seen as the underlying ground of actions. My contention is that it just is the expressivist conception of self that is being assumed from the perspective of Rawlsian political theory. It is the demographic groupings into which voters are classified that come to be the primary markers of political identity. It is because one *identifies* with this or that social group that we can assume she must have a particular set of interests and desires. She must have these interests and desires because the larger group to which she belongs has them. Accordingly, political speech is reduced to a pre-determined range of considerations that we can assume will be articulated by the political actor in her interaction with others. I have in mind her preferences as a voter.

Conversely, the very concept of performative identity precludes the notion of a pre-existing self because it is only through performative speech that our identities are revealed. Moreover, to perform at all presupposes others to whom one appears, that is, performers need audiences. Undoubtedly, the theatrical metaphors at work here are intentional in trying to make sense of political identity, and this is precisely because of the inherently public nature of political life that Arendt would insist upon. Performance is an inherently public activity, and this reflects the Arendtian claim that politics has to do with care for the world and not for man. Indeed, one of the meanings of *public* in *The Human Condition* refers to “the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.”²² The self of action, however, comes into existence only in the action. The performative self expresses nothing, but, rather, *is* the actor *in* the act. It actualizes the potential for new beginning that lies in the condition of natality. In Villa’s words, “Action, according to Arendt, provides us with an escape from the inner, determining multiple self. Freedom, as the spontaneous beginning of something new, is made possible by the transcendence of needs and psychology that *entry into the public realm*

20) Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” 218.

21) Villa, “Modernity, Alienation, and Critique,” 190.

22) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

enables (because here neither the needs of life nor purity of motivation are at stake).”²³ The crucial point here is the distinct significance of the self who appears in public before others. Villa’s words give political resonance to her concept. The performance of actions before others is an achievement, whereas the expression of an underlying self is a kind of projection of a pre-existing set of qualities into a somehow shared human situation.

The focus upon performance gets at the experiential register of the political that I see as essential to Arendtian political thought. Attempting to articulate the experience of the political provides us with existential purchase that more liberal accounts of the citizen and political identity leave out.

V. Concluding Thoughts

Though I have contested liberalism on several grounds in this paper, it is of no use to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Liberal political theory and many of its assumptions about human nature, individual rights, and protection of negative liberties are constitutive of what many contemporary citizens regard as essential to their political self-conceptions. My goal has not been to displace liberal assumptions but to problematize and, more constructively, supplement them. My overall concern emanates from a fundamental political concern, one that also animated Arendt’s thought: does a conception of the political that privileges a notion of the citizen as sovereign and autonomous do anything to combat the loss of a shared world that haunted modernity? Thus, if, as I contend, this is still *the* problem facing contemporary citizens, we must begin to *think* about the political differently and challenge an image of politics as a site of competition for privately interested, rights-bearing individuals. Though this image is dominant in popular political discourse, particularly in the American context, using Arendtian human plurality, we can conceive of political identity as fundamentally relational in nature. Though we need not abandon the concept of an individuated political identity, following the line of argumentation I have pursued in this essay, such individuation must be premised upon our relation to other political actors as we appear before them. In other words, our distinct political identities are emergent only in relation to others who see and hear us. If this is true, and our political identities are irreducibly relational, perhaps we can avoid falling into an ideological or partisan trap every time the opportunity or invitation arises to engage in political discourse.

23) *Ibid.*, 190 (emphasis added).

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