

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: Hannah Arendt and Political Theory

Book Subtitle: Challenging the Tradition

Book Author(s): Steve Buckler

Published by: Edinburgh University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r263k.3>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Edinburgh University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*

JSTOR

## CHAPTER I

---

# *Introduction*

*My assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.*

*I've taken an epigraph from . . . [Karl Jaspers]: 'Give yourself up neither to the past nor to the future. The important thing is to remain wholly in the present'. That sentence struck me right in the heart, so I'm entitled to it.*

Hannah Arendt 1964

In an interview broadcast on West German television in 1964, Hannah Arendt, by then a famous political thinker, insisted that she did not regard herself as a 'philosopher' and had no desire to be seen as such: her concern was with politics. She was not even happy with the suggestion that what she did was 'political philosophy', regarding this as a term overloaded with tradition. She preferred what she took to be the less freighted epithet of 'political theorist'. There is, Arendt argued, a fundamental tension between the philosophical and the political; and the historical tendency to think about the contingent and circumstantial business of politics from a philosophical point of view, seeking to speak about it in terms of the universal and the eternal, has had unfortunate consequences. In the light of this conviction, Arendt said she wished to look at politics 'with eyes unclouded by philosophy' (Arendt 1994: 2). The aim of this book is to explore the implications of this statement as they make themselves felt in Arendt's work and to suggest that they underwrite a distinctive, potent and consistently challenging way of theorising politics.

Arendt was an unorthodox political theorist. Her work divided critical opinion and has continued to do so since her death in 1975.<sup>1</sup> At issue here is not only what Arendt said but also how she said it. Although she taught at major universities, Arendt always maintained something of a distance

from academic life and was no respecter of its established conventions. She wrote in an eclectic style, involving a mixture of idioms and she did not shy away from investing her work with elements of paradox and perplexity. It is a stylistic mix that for some has been a source of profound insights, for others, simply baffling. In view of this, it is surprising that in the extensive critical literature on Arendt relatively little sustained attention has been given to the question of what her unorthodox style betokened in terms of method – to what Arendt believed political theory to be *for* and how, in the light of this, it should be undertaken. There has been a good deal of comment on the substantive content of Arendt's thought: her analysis of totalitarianism; her conception of politics and political action; her view of revolution; and her later writings on the life of the mind. There has also been much comment on her place in relation to other thinkers or themes: Arendt and Jewish thought; Arendt and German philosophy; Arendt and feminism. But little sustained and explicit attention has been given to the methodological issues that her work raises.

In another sense, perhaps, this gap in the literature is a little less surprising. Although she reflected and wrote extensively on the question of thinking and its relation with politics, Arendt's methodological commitments are neither immediately nor easily identifiable and her remarks on the subject were occasional and elusive. It is perhaps easier, initially, to say what Arendt was *not* trying to do. It is clear that she was not, in any accepted sense, a social scientist. The traditional appeal to empirical findings and explanatory hypotheses characteristic of social science amounts, as Arendt saw it, to a 'behaviourist' approach that falsely reduces political conduct to the measurable and the predictable. It is a standpoint that fails, she argued, to capture the authentic nature of politics, which she thought of as an intrinsically spontaneous and unpredictable engagement. It also colludes, she believed, with a propensity in the modern world for conduct to become increasingly routine. It is, in this sense, a form of social analysis that answers to, and helps perpetuate, tendencies inherent in modern mass societies, plagued by what she termed 'the rise of the social', for the primacy of material and technological interests, combined, correspondingly, with an increasingly managerial state, to render life routine and aspirations conformist. In these circumstances, 'behaviour has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship' (Arendt 1958: 41). We tend now to behave increasingly in the way that social scientists falsely assume we inevitably behave: 'the trouble with modern

theories of behaviourism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true' (Arendt 1958: 322).

Equally, as noted above, Arendt distanced herself from the philosophical tradition: 'I have said goodbye to philosophy once and for all . . . I studied philosophy but that does not mean I stayed with it' (Arendt 1994: 2). There was, for Arendt, a distinction to be drawn between philosophy, on the one hand, and political theory, as she thought of it, on the other. It was a distinction that she wanted to draw as part of a conscious attempt to write against the tradition that saw reflection on politics as a branch of philosophy. This was a tradition, she thought, which had resulted in ways of thinking about politics that abstracted away from its real and particular character as a practice, seeking to dictate to it, as it were, 'from above'. On the traditional philosophical view, as Arendt saw it, the chaotic worldly realm presents a problem to be resolved through reflection upon abstract principles that would provide a recipe for eternal harmony. This tradition can be traced back to Plato, who sought to show 'how we can bring about in the commonwealth that complete quiet, that absolute peace, that . . . constitutes the best condition for the life of the philosopher' (Arendt 1982: 21). It is a tradition which potentially renders the contingent and 'noisy' business of politics superfluous. The tradition, since Plato, can be seen as constituting 'various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether' (Arendt 1958: 222). It was for this reason that she regarded the philosophical standpoint as one that threatened to cloud her vision.

So Arendt was concerned to distinguish what she was doing from more conventional philosophical approaches, but she was reticent about characterising her own method. It will be the contention here that despite this reticence on the subject, Arendt adopted a distinctive and identifiable method. I will argue also that an understanding of this method allows us to see in her work a *deep* consistency, by which I mean that her methodological standpoint is not only manifest throughout the body of her writings but also shows a modal consistency with what she takes to be the character of the political as a central experience that needs to be thought about on its own terms. This in turn makes itself felt in the substantive treatments Arendt offers of the key experiential elements of politics, treatments that prove consistently non-reductive. Her unorthodox style, then, is far from capricious and in fact betokens an attempt to think about politics in a manner that encapsulates a fidelity to the political itself in all its contingency and humanity.

Given her reluctance to claim a methodological profile for herself, an account of Arendt's method must necessarily take the form of a reconstruction. In what follows, I will attempt to draw out and reconstruct, through readings of Arendt's works, a fuller sense of her conception of political theory as an engagement. I will seek to show that, for Arendt, to speak fruitfully about politics from a theoretical standpoint requires the adoption of a distinctive voice; one that incorporates a variety of idioms which combine to mediate the theoretical impulse and to bring our discursive resources into more proximate relation with the experience of politics itself. I will suggest that throughout her work, Arendt adopts this voice, modulated in crucial ways such as to provide an inflection that is peculiarly appropriate to the terrain of politics. And this distinctive way of speaking about the political, I will argue, poses a potent challenge to established ways of theorising politics and presents a refreshing alternative to what have arguably become sterile debates.

The aim of reconstructing and characterising a distinctive method in her work is one that Arendt herself would probably have greeted with a degree of suspicion. Her reticence on the question of her method was something that she admitted could be considered a fault (Arendt 1979: 336). It nevertheless answered to real concerns that she harboured. She was reluctant to render herself liable to labelling in relation to established social scientific or philosophical schools of thought. Still less did she wish to be held up as providing a methodological model that could subsequently be applied in routine fashion: her injunction always was that we should think for ourselves. For these reasons, she preferred to let her approach disclose itself through her substantive theoretical engagements. However, I will argue here, in a manner that might allay suspicion, that the methodological approach discernible in Arendt's work, far from normalising her thought by assimilating it to established intellectual traditions, demonstrates its distinctiveness and throws into relief the challenge that it presents to more traditional ways of thinking. Equally, the method I seek to draw out of Arendt's work is not one that lends itself to mechanical reapplication: the modulated theoretical voice that she adopts constitutes, I will suggest, a discursive disposition which cannot be unthinkingly applied, incorporating as it does a sensitivity to the circumstantial that will not yield automatic results in application, and which therefore answers to the injunction to think for oneself. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing to be learned from a reflection on Arendt's approach: it might be seen as embodying a disposition that

can be emulated. It seeks to elicit, in this sense, a response that would see Arendt's own work less as an authority and more as an exemplar – very much in the way that Arendt herself responded to those whom she respected and chose to write about at length (Arendt 1968b).

In order to lay the groundwork for this analysis, it is worth focusing in a preliminary way on Arendt's conception of the relation between thinking and politics. In her early intellectual life, Arendt had no great interest in politics. Her early studies, under the tutelage of Martin Heidegger in Marburg and Karl Jaspers in Heidelberg, were orientated toward basic ontological questions, concerns that were combined with a strong interest in German romanticism. Things changed, however, with the rise of fascism in Germany, when Arendt was shocked into a preoccupation with political matters. The burning of the Reichstag in 1933 convinced her that one could no longer 'simply be a bystander' (Arendt 1994: 5). This did not mean that Arendt was inclined to become a political actor. She *did* act, being involved in a Zionist organisation in Germany (although she was never a committed Zionist) and subsequently, during her exile in Paris in the 1930s prior to her move to the United States, working for an agency helping young Jewish refugees. But she was never, she said, a 'political animal' (Young-Bruehl 1982: xxxix). She never craved the exposure in the public realm that she associated with the life of action; and to the extent that she later became something of a public figure through her work, she found such exposure distasteful. However, her attention as a thinker was drawn to politics. And at issue here was more than a simple revision of academic interest. It was Arendt's conviction that politics now merited *our* attention, and not just her own, because new considerations had come to light, revealed by the experience of totalitarianism. The turn to politics, in this sense, was not just a matter of interest but was also a matter of urgency.

The utterly novel phenomenon of totalitarianism brought to light, Arendt thought, the contingent and fragile character of the sphere of public action as a space of appearance and opinion. We can now see, she thought, that the public realm, if it is not sustained through active participation, may be lost entirely; and it is in this context that she sought a revision to the relation between political thought and the practical terrain of politics itself. The aim was to reflect upon the political in its fully contingent and circumstantial character, and thereby to understand better the potentialities and pitfalls of our ability to act in ways that are spontaneous and which can make a difference to our world. It was

a study, by the same token, that would allow us to measure more effectively the full extent of what Arendt took to be the depoliticisation of modern society, a tendency which left us vulnerable to the ‘anti-politics’ of totalitarianism. The oppression and exile that Arendt herself suffered as a Jew in fascist Germany reflected in an acute form, she came to think, the experiences of disempowerment and homelessness that were characteristic of modern mass societies, with their conformist social imperatives and atrophied political culture, experiences upon which totalitarianism fed and took to extremes. In this light, for Arendt, it was an important feature of the engagement of political theory to find a voice in which to speak constructively about the problems that attend our threadbare political culture, themes that alert us to our vulnerability but which, on reflection, might also enable us to identify elements that would point to or illustrate the potential for more redemptive forms of action. The possibility of a political theory of this sort was tied up, for Arendt, with a departure from the traditional philosophical impulse to dictate to politics from a position of abstraction. The philosophical tradition that would seek to provide permanent answers to political questions and to identify the foundational moral principles upon which it can be thought to rest (principles abandoned with such remarkable ease under totalitarianism) now looks complacent. It may also, for Arendt, be a tradition of thinking that, historically, has colluded with the erosion of public space: in seeking conceptual finality, the tradition has embodied a kind of ‘bypassing’ of the political realm, a realm that is actually only sustained by the contingent exchange of opinion by active citizens.

Arendt did not think that there was no place for philosophical reflection in the manner of the tradition. It was more that we need to recognise now, in the light of recent experiences, that thinking about politics requires a different and more experientially sensitive voice: ‘there may be truths beyond speech and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, to man in so far as he is not a political being’ (Arendt 1958: 4).<sup>2</sup> And Arendt’s work without doubt bears the marks of her philosophical background, particularly with reference to the tradition of phenomenology; but her specific orientation to the political and her adoption of an approach that reflected a desire to think in a way that incorporated a modal immanence with respect to politics makes it unhelpful to characterise her method in a way that depends upon resolving it by reference to broader philosophical approaches. Arendt’s aim was to think in a mode that would reacquaint us with the distinctive fabric

of political experience, gaining greater proximity to the political through the development of a manner of speaking that answers more closely to the discursive conditions of the public realm itself, recognising, as the tradition failed to do, 'that men, not Man live on the earth and inhabit the world' (Arendt 1958: 7).

The political, for Arendt, answers to the human condition of plurality. The public realm, where authentic politics takes place and freedom is enacted, is constituted by speech and action undertaken by plural beings in public view, interacting on the basis of autonomous viewpoints and freely-formed opinions. For this very reason, it is contingent: 'it comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action . . . wherever people gather it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever' (Arendt 1958: 199). The public realm is not a given and so needs to be generated. This fragility has been thrown into relief by the erosion of the public sphere in modern mass societies and by the emergence of totalitarianism, which sought to destroy it altogether. In the light of this, there is no room for complacency in respect of how we think about politics. In particular, we must now avoid reductive ways of thinking that would seek to resolve the phenomenal character of politics into something more permanent by reference to eternal principles, natural categories or historical teleologies that would insinuate a sense that it is somehow guaranteed. Politics has no 'common denominator'; it cannot be indemnified theoretically, only sustained actively (Arendt 1958: 57). We need, therefore, to theorise politics in an idiom that answers to its distinctiveness as a practice and which bears, in its discursive character, the marks of a recognition that politics may be different from other human activities that can be thought to carry firmer guarantees of their place. This is reflected in Arendt's view that a true political theory must 'make the plurality of men, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs . . . the object' and must speak accordingly (Arendt 1990: 103).

In what follows, I will seek to identify and explore what I take to be a consistent methodological commitment of this sort identifiable in Arendt's work. She sets herself against the dominant tradition by adopting what can be seen, at least from the point of view of that tradition, to be *mediations* of the theoretical voice which establish an authentically alternative way of speaking. The kind of proximity and immanence she seeks when thinking about politics do not cancel the distance that the theoretical standpoint adopts with respect to its object, a distance that provides the space within which suitable forms of ratiocination can



occur: 'it is not uncommon for outsiders and spectators to gain a sharper insight into the actual meaning of what happens to go on before or around them than would be possible for the actual actors or participants, entirely absorbed as they must be in the events' (Arendt cited in Young-Bruehl 1982: xxxix). However, Arendt adopts a self-consciously mediated standpoint, modulating the voice of theory in such a way as to curtail the impulse toward philosophical abstraction, and correspondingly to curtail the temporal insensitivity that goes with it. I will seek to show that her approach incorporates two central mediations to the standpoint of the political theorist, which in turn lead to key modulations in the theoretical voice, mitigating its stridency and thereby developing a novel alternative. This self-consciously modulated way of speaking allows Arendt to retain a focus upon the phenomenological ground of politics itself.

I will suggest that this is achieved by identifiable mediations that combine to 'save the appearances' of the political. First, there is an epistemological mediation, serving to avoid conceptual closure, expressed in a situated, dialogic modulation of the theoretical voice, so that 'the results [of thinking] can be communicated in such a way that they lose the character of results' (Arendt 1994: 183). Second, and implied by the first, there is a temporal mediation, serving to avoid historical closure, expressed in a fragmented narrational modulation that answers to the recognition that 'political actions are meaningful regardless of their historical location' and that their resolution into a broader history represents the 'ruin' of their meaning (Arendt 1977: 81). These two forms of mediation provide for a way of thinking 'which employs neither history nor coercive logic as crutches' (Arendt 1968b: 8). This confers upon Arendt's thinking an intrinsically circumspect or 'tentative' character (Arendt 1979: 303). This is arguably in keeping with a concern to resist closure and to speak consciously in the light of recognition of irreducible plurality.<sup>3</sup>

I will seek to show that these mediations, embodied in Arendt's stylistic mix, constitute a method that displays the kind of deep consistency mentioned earlier. This is not to say that Arendt's thinking did not develop. Without doubt she progressed in terms of the substantive experiences that she addressed, and she refocused her interests. I will seek to demonstrate that there is, nevertheless, an overarching unity of purpose in her work, expressed through a methodological consistency. Having characterised this method in a preliminary way, attention will be given primarily, although not exclusively, to Arendt's most well-known analyses of aspects

of the political in order to see how her method is applied. I will examine Arendt's approach to the totalitarian form of anti-politics in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968a); to the nature of authentic political freedom in *The Human Condition* (1958); and to the capacity for new beginnings in *On Revolution* (1973). These cases illustrate Arendt's mediated and correspondingly modulated voice at work, and show how it delivers subtle and distinctive accounts of the phenomena concerned. In looking at these cases, we will see that the concern governing Arendt's approach is not that of the philosopher seeking conceptual finality, nor is it that of the political scientist or historian seeking explanatory closure of one sort or another. Her concern with politics developed, as we have noted, in the light of recent events that signalled a changed world, where our freedom is shown in its fullest contingency. Arendt's rethinking of political theory is therefore guided, I will argue, by a preoccupation with the present. The sense of continuity, or sometimes progress, that is insinuated by appeals to finality and closure do not match current experience and accordingly Arendt sought to think in a manner that avoided reductive resolutions of the political. In thinking politically, for Arendt, we dwell between past and future: recognition of this, again, is something that she thought answered to the newly revealed character of politics as undetermined with respect to the past and unpredictable with respect to the future.

An exploration of these themes brings out the distinctive nature of Arendt's contribution to political theory. It allows also for a critical assessment of some of the interpretations of Arendt's work that touch upon her method but which seek to relate her to more familiar approaches in political theory. There has, for example, been a tendency, not uncommon amongst commentators, to attribute to Arendt a method based upon narrative, held to be a potent alternative to the more mainstream analytical modes of theorising but which is by now itself somewhat conventional and provides for an unduly limiting characterisation of Arendt. By contrast, there has also been a tendency to assimilate her work more closely to the kind of thinking which seeks foundational principles that might ground a just political order, most often evident recently in deontological liberalism; an analysis that imposes an interpretive straightjacket that I will suggest curtails an appreciation of Arendt's achievement. Assimilations of these kinds, I will argue, fail to capture the innovative and challenging character of Arendt's thinking and constitute attempts to 'normalise' her work. By the same token, the discussion will bring out the scope of the salutary and potentially challenging alternative Arendt

presents to the conventional methodological standpoints underlying much mainstream political theory.

What is the nature of this challenge? The dominant tendency is to frame the engagement of political theory in terms answerable to more 'basic' philosophical positions and, correspondingly, to derive appropriate methods from deeper epistemological presuppositions. It was noted some time ago by the political philosopher John Dunn, in terms which continue to resonate, that political theory framed in this way displays a characteristic disengagement from the experiential ground of its object, from real politics. For Dunn, 'most contemporary political philosophy . . . consists in . . . the bringing to bear of philosophy as an achieved academic practice upon the sorry conceptual disorder of public affairs' (Dunn 1990: 195). The result is an abstraction away from the recognisable terms upon which politics as a practice takes place in the world. Dunn's further point is that this tendency creates a sterility in political theory and in the methodological debates underlying it. In recent decades, for example, the principal methodological issues have arisen from contending epistemological positions associated with 'foundational' and 'anti-foundational' standpoints. Evidence of sterility here is to be found in the fact that not a great deal, in substantive terms, would seem to turn on these debates. The appeal to basic philosophical presuppositions, in the name of reforming the 'sorry disorder' of politics, has the effect of creating a theoretical distance between theory and its object such as to generate critical leverage; but a vocal distance of this sort, largely negating any proximity to the phenomenal character of the political itself, begins to look like an over-rated virtue where significant epistemological disagreements do not issue much in the way of substantive disagreements and do not seem to warrant significant departures from what appears to be a broad consensus around conventional liberal democratic principles. If one considers the standpoints that have tended to inform contemporary debates, ranged across the epistemological divide, representing in various ways a deontological form of foundational liberalism on the one hand and non-foundational, communitarian forms of thinking on the other, there does not seem to be a great deal dividing them with respect to broad substantive political orientations. The implication of this is again well-captured by Dunn, who notes that the 'comforting resonance' between mainstream political theory and prevalent popular convictions may be 'less a token of the authority of political philosophy than of its radical domestication, its complete subordination to the dynamics of an existing ideological field'

(Dunn 1990: 195). Arendt did not concern herself a great deal with contemporary trends or influential schools of thought in political theory and she was completely uninterested in attempting in any way to locate her own work with respect to such trends or schools. However, it is unquestionably the case that her way of doing political theory resonates with the kinds of concerns expressed by Dunn and potentially provides a potent alternative to those approaches that have been prominent in the contemporary debate and which, in Arendt's terms, still answer in crucial ways to the philosophical tradition.

A further feature here, not unrelated to this consideration, is the lack of sustained attention that mainstream political theory gives to some of the problems that arguably attend modern democratic politics – phenomena such as civic disengagement, mendacious political discourse or widespread gullibility – features which, from the abstracted philosophical point of view, appear as problems too contingent to be met head on, but which were of deep and urgent concern to Arendt. If the theoretical distancing from its object, effected by making political theory answerable to basic philosophical concerns, proves somewhat nugatory with respect to its own critical promise, we may be led, as Arendt was, to a reconsideration of the relationship between theory and practice, or between thinking and acting. The proximity to the terrain of politics that Arendt's modulated voice achieves provides us with an exemplification of how to think about politics in a way that might allow a greater sensitivity to the texture of the political and, thereby, to allow more serious attention to issues about the health of our democratic political culture.

These themes will be developed in a discussion that will move through three stages. First (in Chapters 2 and 3), I will seek to draw out, characterise and explore Arendt's distinctive method. This will proceed from an analysis of her comments on the relationship between thinking and acting, and I will show that she sees the contrast between these two engagements in terms of a constitutive tension which underwrites the authentic viability of each. The connection between this and the modern vulnerability to totalitarianism will be examined and this will provide the basis for an understanding of how, in Arendt's view, modern political experiences have exposed the bankruptcy of our moral and intellectual traditions and, in the light of this, how a new sense of the potentialities and dangers associated with a contingent realm of political action has emerged. I will suggest that this realisation forms the basis for Arendt's desire to revise the manner in which we theorise politics, a revision that

dispenses with prior philosophical assumptions and incorporates, in its formal character, a fidelity to the fabric of the political. These considerations, I will argue, make sense of the idiomatic characteristics of Arendt's writing that incorporate the key modulations to the theoretical voice in both epistemological and temporal terms, lending Arendt's approach a highly distinctive modal immanence.

In the second stage of the argument (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), I will examine the application of Arendt's method in respect of some of the key political phenomena that she addresses. I will analyse Arendt's exploration of the totalitarian form and will seek to show that her approach consciously avoids the kind of explanatory closure which would distract us from what she called the 'shock of experience', inviting us instead to engage in an ongoing reflection upon its implications for the crisis-ridden contemporary era (Arendt 1968a: viii). A further embodiment of Arendt's distinctive approach is to be found, I will argue, in her analysis of the concept of action, where she avoids making atemporal claims about human nature and instead looks at the issue wholly from 'the vantage point of our recent experiences' with a view to creating a space for dialogue that might renew, in the light of these new experiences, our sense of contingent political possibilities, and which might generate, thereby, the discursive resources suitable to addressing present problems (Arendt 1958: 2). A final substantive exemplification of Arendt's method will be explored in her account of the French and American Revolutions, showing her concern with the political significance of these phenomena 'for the world we live in' (Arendt 1973: 44). I will argue that her treatment of revolution, rather than seeking conceptual or explanatory finality, attempts to provide images of spontaneity that can form reference points for reflection and dialogue concerning the problem of new beginnings, bringing home to us the sense in which this problem is not one that can be solved theoretically, and pointing instead to the political realm of speech and action itself.

In the third stage of the argument (Chapters 7 and 8), I will explore some of the further implications of Arendt's distinctive theoretical approach. I will address the vexed question of what is sometimes seen as the 'missing' ethical dimension to Arendt's political theory. I will argue that Arendt's failure to provide an ethical blueprint applicable to politics is in no way an oversight. In a manner consistent with her more general method, she appeals neither to moral theory nor to tradition as sources of ethical constraint in politics, sources that might be susceptible to formu-

lation in terms of a prior blueprint. Rather, for Arendt, it is in the very dynamic of political action and appearance itself that judgment arises as a form of constraint. In this sense, I will argue that the 'agonal' element in Arendt's conception of political action, far from preventing her developing a political ethics, provides the core of her ethical conception. These considerations will be supplemented by an account of what Arendt's approach implies for the role and responsibilities of the thinker in relation to politics. Through a comparison between the vocations of the actor and the thinker, an account of the burdens attendant upon attention to, and exposure in, the public realm will be provided. Arendt's comments on her own sense of the role of the theorist will be reviewed with these themes in mind.

The discussion will conclude with a review of the argument and will examine the challenges that Arendt's conception of political theory presents to more orthodox contemporary approaches, in both foundational and non-foundational forms. I will argue that Arendt provides us with potentially important correctives to the tendencies in modern political theory to resolve political questions, on the one hand, into questions of moral philosophy or, on the other, into questions of cultural convention. Each of these alternatives risks losing contact with the phenomenal terrain of politics itself, and therefore of losing the ability to deal profitably with the problems of the modern polity and our compromised democratic culture, problems that Arendt's method kept very much in the foreground.

## NOTES

1. For commentary on some of the controversies that Arendt's work provoked, see Young-Bruehl 1982: 223–33, 286–90, 305, 309–17, 337–78, 402–6, 412–30, 471.
2. When Arendt embarked, toward the end of her life, on what was to be her unfinished work on the life of the mind, she was, she said, returning to her first love (Young-Bruehl 1982: 327).
3. The argument here bears comparison with Margaret Canovan's characterisation of Arendt's method as combining the phenomenological analysis of experience with a fragmentary historiography. Canovan's principal concern, however, is with the substance of Arendt's work and she does not develop this methodological formula. (Canovan 1992: 4–5).