

# The Rule of the People: Arendt, *Arché*, and Democracy

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**T**his article presents a novel critical account of a key concept in democratic theory, “rule,” via an unorthodox interpretation of Hannah Arendt’s work. Many theorists treat democracy as one type of regime; others, stressing the importance of unruliness to democratic politics, challenge the reduction of democracy to a form of rule. Although this debate remains caught within conventional oppositions between order, closure, and continuity; and interruption, openness, and novelty, Arendt shows this whole matrix of oppositions to be an artifact of the dominance of a hierarchical understanding of rule. Her unusual critique of rule and her distinctive account of the meaning of “beginning” draw attention to an important dimension of political activity that lies off these axes of opposition, shedding new light on democratic agency and the forces that obstruct it.

*Perhaps the very fact that these two elements, the concern with stability and the spirit of the new, have become opposites in political thought and terminology . . . must be recognized to be among the symptoms of our loss.*

—Hannah Arendt (1965, 223)

“Democracy,” writes David Held (1996) “means a form of government in which, in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule” (1). One important kind of democratic theory is devoted to filling in the details of this basic formula, and to debating the merits of the resulting array of models of democracy: classical, modern, direct, representative, participatory, minimalist, deliberative, aggregative, and so on. Another important kind of democratic theory, however, lingers over the “elementary idea” of democracy itself, exploring problems that lurk in and behind its basic terms (Dahl 1989, 3). Lately, for instance, many democratic theorists have been preoccupied with the fraught idea of “the people,” asking what sorts of things peoples are and how their boundaries are to be settled. This is a question about identity; about who the people are. There is, however, an equally vital but relatively neglected question to be asked about activity; about what the people do.<sup>1</sup> Our characterizations of the activity of democratic politics have far-reaching implications: they shape our efforts to give practical expression to democratic principles, as well as our assessments of

the social and political forces that obstruct democracy. What, then, does it mean to say that in democracy the people rule?

In mainstream democratic theory, the term “rule” has received relatively little attention, not because it has been thought to be unimportant, but because its meaning has seemed comparatively straightforward. To “rule,” Webster’s tells us, means “to have power or command,” to “exercise supreme authority,” and “to exercise control.”<sup>2</sup> To say that democracy is a form of rule, then, is just to say that it is one distinctive way of arranging the institutions and practices through which authoritative decisions are made and executed in a polity. Of course, there has been fierce disagreement about what, exactly, makes rule democratic. For an early generation of state-centered political scientists, democratic rule meant government authorized by a sovereign people with a common will; for their pluralist critics, it referred to authoritative decisions generated by a process that balanced the competing interests of a multiplicity of groups (Gunnell 2004). For adherents of the so-called minimalist account of democracy, rule is democratic when people are able to choose their rulers in competitive elections (Schumpeter 1942); for others, more intensive and direct forms of popular participation in government are required (Pateman 1970). These and similar disagreements, however, are ultimately about *who* rules under this or that institutional arrangement: the thought that politics is at bottom a matter of ruling, and that ruling consists in the exercise of authoritative control, remains part of the taken-for-granted background against which these debates take place.<sup>3</sup>

One important strand of democratic theory, however, throws the idea of rule as such into relief. It does so by drawing in an unexpected way on a species of antidemocratic polemic. From classical Athens onward, critics of democracy have argued that because

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<sup>1</sup> For similar efforts to shift attention from identity to agency see Ferguson 2003, Frank 2004, Tully 1999, and Zerilli 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, s.v. “Rule.”

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “who rules” is Dahl’s (used interchangeably with “who governs” in Dahl 1961, e.g., 1, 89). Dahl (1989) illustrates the invisibility of the concept of rule as such: the fundamental questions of democratic theory, he says, are “who ought to comprise ‘the people’ and what does it mean for them ‘to rule’” (3), yet for him this second question concerns what counts as rule *by the people*, not what “ruling” is; he settles that issue quickly and tacitly by defining democracy as “a unique process of making collective and binding decisions” (5).

the people are nothing but a formless multitude, incapable of government, their rule would in effect be no rule at all, but monstrous disorder. Many democratic theorists respond to this charge by straightforwardly defending the people's qualifications for rule, but some refuse to accommodate themselves to the terms of this critique. Sheldon Wolin, for example, has famously proposed "accepting the familiar charges that democracy is inherently unstable, inclined toward anarchy, and identified with revolution, and using these traits as the basis for a different, a constitutional conception of democracy" (Wolin 1994, 37). Skeptical of the very idea of democracy as a regime, Wolin reminds us that subjection inhabits every form of rule, even those in which we exercise considerable control over our rulers, or rule ourselves; and he warns that, in conceiving of democracy as a system of command and obedience, we risk sacrificing the spirit of insubordination that animates it.<sup>4</sup>

Such challenges have opened up space for thinking explicitly about rule. At the same time, because they proceed by inverting a common objection to democracy, the space they have opened is structured by a series of stark oppositions between those phenomena rule is supposed to enable, such as stability, order, closure, and continuity, and those it is supposed to inhibit, such as change, interruption, openness, and novelty. These oppositions have driven democratic theory into difficulties. Although the subtlest democratic critics of rule, Wolin included, do not merely reject the first set of terms in favor of the second, neither is it clear how their acknowledgment of the importance of rule is to be reconciled with their embrace of unruliness; the result has been an increasing tendency to characterize democracy as a constitutively paradoxical enterprise, caught between the ideal of popular sovereignty, in which the people jointly exercise control over their collective destiny, and the ideal of popular insurgency, in which the people spontaneously shatter the bonds of established political forms. In this article, I neither affirm this paradox nor solve it. Instead, with the help of an unorthodox interpretation of the thought of Hannah Arendt, I attempt to loosen the grip this paradox and its terms have on us, and to direct our attention to a neglected dimension of concern about democratic political activity that lies off the conceptual axis defined by these two opposing visions of democracy.

Arendt might seem a surprising candidate for this undertaking: her consistently critical stance toward the concept of rule, and her appreciation of the phenomenon of novelty or "beginning," would appear to pull us back toward the terms of the problem I have just described. However, Arendt's critique of rule is distinctive. Her claim is not that the practice of ruling, by securing stability, stifles change: that sort of criticism questions the *value* of rule for politics, but it accepts the conventional view of what ruling is and how it works—including especially the assumption that stability, continuity, order, and related phenomena are to be

understood as products of the exercise of supreme authoritative control. For Arendt, by contrast, the problem with the term "rule" is precisely that it carries with it this problematic but little-questioned interpretation of political phenomena; from her perspective, the whole matrix of oppositions that structures contemporary democratic theory is itself an artifact of the ongoing dominance of this interpretation, which was originally employed to rationalize hierarchical social and political forms.<sup>5</sup> Correspondingly, Arendt's aim is not simply to rehabilitate those phenomena that, within that matrix, are positioned as rule's opposites: on her use, "beginning" picks out not the spontaneous disruption of existing patterns, but the sense in which action, whether disruptive or not, involves attention and responsiveness to worldly events; and what threatens "beginning" thus understood is not the enforcement of regularity, but the erosion of the contexts in which events call for responses and, thus, in which it makes sense to act at all.

To make this case, this article draws an unfamiliar Arendt out from under familiar interpretations by attending to neglected or puzzling elements in her work, including her insistence that the Greek *archê* and *archein* meant not only "rule" and "to rule" but also "beginning" and "to begin"; her suggestion that novelty inheres in all events, even those that are expected or predicted; and the curious epigraph from Dante at the head of the chapter on action in *The Human Condition*, which shows her account of beginning to be part of a subtle critique of hierarchical doctrines of rule and of the version of Aristotelian metaphysics on which they rely. These detailed readings clarify longstanding interpretive puzzles about the meaning of the larger conception of action in which Arendt's treatments of rule and beginning are embedded, puzzles that are structured by oppositions analogous to those that govern contemporary debates about democracy and rule. By altering our sense of how Arendt fits into those contemporary debates, however, these readings also help reorient democratic theory, opening new ways of thinking about the impediments to democracy and about the nature and operation of political practices and institutions.

## ARENDR AND THE PARADOX OF RULE

Although Sheldon Wolin is perhaps the best-known critic of the idea of democracy as a regime among American political scientists, his appreciation of the uncomfortable fit between democracy and rule is shared

<sup>4</sup> For similar argument made in terms of liberalism see Flathman 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt's critique of conventional views of *ruling* thus fits well with Wittgenstein's (1953) critique of conventional views of *rules* and *rule-following*, at least as long as Wittgenstein is not understood as saying merely that rules, as instruments for the production of control, leave more room than we sometimes believe for non-rule-bound freedom. What is radical about both Arendt and Wittgenstein is that they refuse the opposition between rules as sources of determination and freedom as the power to exceed or transform rule, thereby letting us see the fundamental *similarity* (though not identity) of breaking or subverting a rule; modifying a rule; *and* going on as before. See, for example, Pitkin 1993, Tully 1999, Zerilli 2003.

by a range of democratic theorists working in otherwise disparate traditions. Just as Wolin embraces conventional depictions of democracy as anarchic and revolutionary, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004), building on a distinctive reading of Spinoza, abandon the idea of the sovereign people in favor of the “multitude,” which they call a “maddeningly elusive” subject that “cannot be entirely corralled into the hierarchical organs of a political body,” and which “banishes sovereignty from politics” (192, 340). Jacques Rancière identifies democracy with the “rupture in the logic of *arche*,” or rule, that takes place when those who have “no part” within a regime suddenly appear and speak in public without authorization (Rancière 2001, par. 14; 1999, 29–30). Finally, Ernesto Laclau (2001, 7; Laclau and Mouffe 1985), building on the influential work of Claude Lefort (1988, 17), characterizes democracy as constitutively torn between rule and the suspension of rule—or, in his terms, between the “occupation” of the “place of power” by particular groups who claim to represent universal values, and the equally ongoing exposure of the ideological character of every such claim, which keeps the place of power open or “empty.”

Although at least some of these authors flirt with a simple rejection of rule, all ultimately acknowledge that rule is unavoidable, perhaps even (partly) beneficial. This acknowledgment pulls against these authors’ forceful critiques of rule, and the resulting tension both enriches and troubles their work. It leaves Wolin caught between two pictures of democracy that he does not quite reconcile: democracy as an episodic, “fugitive” rebelliousness in the face of the nearly overwhelming power of state and capital; and democracy as a continuous, everyday practice of cooperation, deliberation, and decision making (Wolin 1996; 2004, 601–6; Xenos 2001). Similarly, Hardt and Negri (2004) alternate between invocations of the unlimited potential of the multitude to exceed every form or order—under the slogan “become different than you are!” (356)—and characterizations of the activity of the multitude in terms of “decision-making” and “the rule of everyone by everyone” (339, 237; Passavant 2004; Shapiro 2004). For Rancière, the tension gives rise to an account of democracy as an ephemeral practice, always “on the shore of its own disappearance,” as the unauthorized voices that momentarily expose the injustice at the heart of rule find themselves incorporated within a new order or regime (Rancière 2001, par. 25; Deranty 2003, 152–53); and for Laclau (1996) the tension results in what sometimes sound like self-contradictory descriptions of democratic political action: democracy, he writes, consists in “the ambiguous practice of trying to fill [a] gap”—to occupy the empty space signified by universal terms like “the people”—“while keeping it permanently open” (59).

The tensions that characterize these approaches are not necessarily flaws. Instead, as Alan Keenan has eloquently argued, they may be signs of responsiveness to paradoxes intrinsic to the very notion of democracy. On the one hand, Keenan (2003) explains, democracy’s radical inclusiveness and its radically self-grounding

character mean that “democratic politics renders everything provisional and open to question,” including especially the identity of “the people” itself. On the other hand, “in order to be the kind of entity able to have and to regulate its own collective life, ‘the people’ must take on an identity whose relative clarity and stability depend on particular foundations, traditions, and institutional forms that cannot be fully general or fully open to question” (10). For Keenan, this means that democracy is an ideal “at odds with itself, torn between the closure necessary for the people’s identity and rule, and the openness of contestation and revisability” (13). This, in turn, makes democracy into a site of “inevitable trespass, failure, frustration, disappointments, and incompleteness,” because democratic actors always risk betraying some of their principles in their efforts to respect others (22). Although Keenan recognizes that such accounts of democracy, with their Sisyphian feel, might easily provoke withdrawal or resentment, he insists that that it is better to face up to the paradox than to sweep the problem under a tidy philosophical rug, and so he counsels us to supplement “overly formal and theoretical” affirmations of democratic paradox with practical strategies, including new forms of civic virtue, that will “make it easier to accept the frustration and limitation of democratic action” without falling into resignation or rage (20, 22).

The contours of this conversation about democracy and rule are echoed in contemporary treatments of the political thought of Hannah Arendt. For some readers, Arendt’s most obvious contribution to our thinking about rule lies in her forceful denial that ruling has any proper place in politics at all, notwithstanding its central position in the tradition of Western political thought. In *The Human Condition*, for instance, Arendt (1958) argues that “the concept of rule” is at the center of the philosophical tradition’s long-standing effort to escape from the uncertain world of politics—typically by substituting the logic of “making” or *poiësis*, in which a craftsman applies an already-given set of “rules and standards” to his material, for the unruliness of genuine action (222, 227; see also Villa 1996, 51). Likewise, in *On Revolution*, Arendt (1965) seems to embrace an idea of freedom as what she calls “no-rule,” a kind of political life “without a division between rulers and ruled” and from which, in fact, “the notion of rule . . . was entirely absent” (30). This rejection of “rule” has led some readers to identify Arendt, approvingly, with an anarchic tradition of political thought that sees freedom as intrinsically opposed to form and associated instead with revolutionary events (Vatter 2000, 14) or with perpetual movement and the transgression of borders (Herzog 2004); and it has led other readers, even sympathetic ones, to worry about the “immoralism” that seems to lurk within her account of action as “eruptive,” revolutionary creativity (Kateb 2000, 134–44).

Other readers of Arendt take her to be more ambivalent toward the phenomenon of rule, but these readings remain structured by the presupposition of an opposition between rule and freedom, closure and openness. Keenan (2003), for example, writes that Arendt’s

conception of political freedom in terms of novelty “illuminate[s] in profound ways the constitutive openness of democratic politics” (17), which, properly understood, is never a closed system but is permanently exposed to the possibilities of critique, contestation, expansion, transformation, and reinvention. At the same time, Arendt also sees that freedom understood as beginning is, on its own, an evanescent phenomenon: as Keenan (80) says, it “needs the support of political foundations in order to be more than an occasional or marginal occurrence.” This generates a paradox, for while Arendt *tries* to identify a kind of foundation that could be made perfectly consistent with freedom—looking first, in *The Human Condition*, to the phenomenon of promising, and then, in *On Revolution*, to the American Constitution—neither of these attempts succeeds. “Promising,” Keenan says, like the constitutionalization of authority, “can effectively *lay down the law* of freedom only by immediately violating that same law: it is a free act that at once makes less than fully free all acts that follow its law and example” (89; see also 95). On this reading, Arendt’s work gives us both poles of the fundamental tension between democracy’s unruliness and its need for rule.

Both of these ways of interpreting Arendt’s (1958) critique of rule fit well with, and are sustained by, a common way of understanding her larger theoretical project: one that sees her as attempting to purify politics of a whole host of supposedly nonpolitical phenomena, such as rule, violence, sovereignty, embodiment, sentiment, and many others. There is good reason to read Arendt this way: she often presents herself precisely as a policer of boundaries, reminding us of the differences among the various components of the *vita activa* so that we can keep each one in its “proper location in the world” (73). In particular, because it is *action* that seems to be most in danger of being smothered by these other phenomena, doing this seems to require that she “discover a set of criteria that will isolate genuinely political action from its various simulacra” (Villa 1996, 20). It is at this point, however, that the substantive problem of the relationship between democracy and rule joins up with a long-standing interpretive problem about the meaning of Arendt’s concept of action, for it has proved maddeningly difficult for her readers to flesh out these criteria, and so to determine “what specific activities *count*” for her as instances of action (Villa 1996, 28). The trouble is that, strictly understood, genuine action can seem vanishingly rare (and rarefied), hemmed in by irresistible social forces as well as by Arendt’s own puritanical insistence that action be undertaken for the sake of nothing but itself; while, capaciously understood, action can lose its specificity, as though anything could be action if it were regarded in the right way or done in the right spirit.<sup>6</sup> Just as democracy has come to seem torn between rule and novelty, order and change, Arendt’s idiosyncratic conception of action has also come to seem torn between the extremes of narrowness and ubiquity.

<sup>6</sup> For an especially vivid account of this problem see Pitkin 1998, 177–83; see also Dietz 2002, chapters 5–6; Honig 1993, chapter 4.

Nevertheless, there is reason to suspect that Arendt does more than simply reproduce the paradox of democracy and rule; and, relatedly, that the function of her conception of action is different than we have supposed. Consider her comments about rule more closely. In *The Human Condition* and elsewhere, Arendt (1958) argues that “rule” in its ordinary sense of a power of command over others is a deeply antipolitical concept, the “hallmark” of various efforts by political actors and philosophers, starting with Plato, to “escape from politics altogether” (222). Yet the dominance of “rule” in this sense, Arendt claims, actually represents the loss of a vital ambiguity in the Greek words *archê* and *archein*, the terms that are now conventionally translated into English as the noun “rule” and the verb “to rule,” and which are often rendered *Herrschaft* and *herrschen* in German.<sup>7</sup> These Greek words, Arendt observes, originally had to do with “beginning,” with setting something into motion, as well as with leading; while the complementary verb *prattein* (whence *praxis*) originally referred to the achievement or completion of a course of action.<sup>8</sup> The interrelatedness of these two action-terms, *archein* and *prattein*, captured something of the mutual vulnerability that Arendt says characterizes action: “the dependence of the beginner and leader upon others for help and the dependence of his followers upon him for an occasion to act themselves” (189).

Actors and theorists alike, however, experienced this vulnerability as a limitation, and their efforts to insulate themselves from the uncertainties of action—to “make sure that the beginner would remain the complete master of what he had begun”—are reflected in the subsequent transformations in the meaning of these terms. “In the realm of action,” their thinking went, “this isolated mastership can be achieved only if the others are no longer needed to join the enterprise of their own accord, with their own motives and aims, but are used to execute orders, and if, on the other hand, the beginner who took the initiative does not permit himself to get involved in the action itself” (Arendt, 1958, 222). As a consequence, *archein* and *prattein* “split into two

<sup>7</sup> Arendt’s (1960) own translation of *The Human Condition* into German consistently uses *herrschen*, *Herrschaft*, and so forth where the English edition has “rule,” and her comments about the Greek *archê* and *archein* in her German-language notebooks focus on the interpretation of *archê* as *Herrschaft* (e.g., 2002, 161). Her close association of “rule” with *Herrschaft* may explain why Arendt does not try to reclaim the English term: *Herrschaft*, which can be traced back to medieval German words designating superior rank as well as seniority, does not bear the same productive ambiguity she finds in *archê* and *archein* (Moraw 1982, 5–6). Indeed, when Arendt (1958) translates the phrase “new form of government” into German twice in the space of one paragraph in *The Human Condition*, initially to refer to totalitarianism and then to refer to the “people’s councils” to which she was famously sympathetic—she renders it “*neu[e] Staats- und Herrschaftsform*” in the first instance and “*neue Staats- und Regierungsform*” in the second (216; 1960, 211), which suggests that she is willing to use derivatives of the Latin *regō* (to which both *regieren* and “rule” are related) when she could contrast them with *herrschen* and *Herrschaft*. (This does not mean that *regō*-derivatives are, for her, unambiguously positive: for a contrasting case, see her discussion of “rules” [*Regeln*] in 1958, 225–27; thanks to an *APSR* reviewer on this point.)

<sup>8</sup> Arendt 1958, 189, 222–25; see also 1968, 165–66; 1965, 213; 2002, 161, 327.

altogether different functions: the function of giving commands, which became the prerogative of the ruler, and the function of executing them, which became the duty of his subjects (Arendt 1958, 189; see also 222–23). Once *archein* and *prattein* were separated in this way, *archein* itself—now recognizable as what we conventionally call “ruling”—began to lose its ambiguity, and the idea of “beginning” came to play an increasingly insignificant role in the conceptualization of action and politics. Plato himself did still exploit the “equivocal significance of the word *archein*” by appealing to the soul’s status as the beginning (*archê*) of all motion in order to explain why the soul ought to rule (*archein*) the body.<sup>9</sup> Yet to think about beginning in this way, which reduced it to a kind of “legitimation” of rule, actually prepared the ground for the ultimate disappearance of “the element of beginning,” in the sense of the initiation of an undertaking, “from the concept of rulership.” “With it,” Arendt (1958) concludes, “the most elementary and authentic understanding of human freedom disappeared from political philosophy” (224–25).

Two features of this critique of rule deserve special attention. First and most fundamental is its attention to language. For Arendt, the elements of our political vocabulary are not just ways of pointing to given things in the world: the capacity of a word like “rule” to refer to something always also involves an interpretation of the world, an explicit or tacit sense of why some phenomena belong together, what they are like, and why they are significant. By focusing specifically on the language of rule—that is, on the gaps between the meanings of terms that are often thought to be equivalent, like *archê* and “rule,” or on differences in the use of *archê* and *archein* themselves across time or from one author to another—Arendt signals that her concerns about rule lie at *this* level: instead of reversing the positive valence traditionally assigned to the phenomenon called “rule,” she aims her critique at the interpretation of the world that the word “rule” carries with it (and which underlies both positive and negative assessments of rule’s place in politics). Second, among the particular features of this interpretation that draw Arendt’s critical attention, one of the most important is the close association it posits between relationships of subordination on the one hand and such phenomena as stability, regularity, and continuity on the other. The conceit of the idea of rule, Arendt (1958) tells us, is “the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey” (222). Yet the fact that structures of subordination often *do* produce more or less stable orders does not mean that they are the only forms of human relationship that can do so, nor does it mean that their strategies for ensuring stability are sustainable: the ideal of isolated mastery, as Arendt repeatedly reminds us, misleads rulers

<sup>9</sup> Arendt (1958) says that “it is decisive for Plato, as he says expressly at the end of the *Laws*, that only the beginning (*archê*) is entitled to rule (*archein*)” (224); as her notebooks indicate, this is a gloss on *Laws* 895b and 967d (Plato [1926] 2004, 332–33; 562–63). See Arendt 2002, 323–24.

about the sources of their own power and so exposes them to failure and reversal (189; see also 222, 227). This, too, indicates that the point of her critique of rule and her recovery of beginning is not to celebrate those phenomena that are conventionally taken to be rule’s opposites, such as disorder, instability, interruptions of regularity, or radical breaks in continuity, but to prise apart phenomena that the idea of “rule” has taught us to see as inseparably connected.

Understood in these terms, Arendt’s work would intersect with debates in contemporary democratic theory in an unexpected way. It would suggest that the paradox that democratic theorists have identified in the relationship between democracy and rule may best be understood neither as a problem to be solved nor as a limitation to be accepted, but rather as a *symptom* of the ongoing dominance of political theory and practice by the idea of rule—that is, by a set of background assumptions about the world that are held in common by those who see democracy as a structure of authoritative control, *and* by those who reject such regime-oriented views of democracy in the name of revolutionary insubordination, *and* by those whose work is structured by their acknowledgment of the appeal of both positions. Consider again Claude Lefort’s influential description of the transition from monarchy to democracy, in which “power,” once embodied in the king, becomes an “empty place” (Lefort 1988, 17). For many of Lefort’s readers, this story expresses the paradoxical conditions under which democratic politics is bound to proceed (Keenan 2003, 5–8; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 186–87; Rancière 2001, pars. 15–16). For Arendt, by contrast, this story would count less as a representation of our real conditions than as a vivid example of our enthrallment by the picture of rule as authoritative control. In Lefort’s account, after all, the “place” of power remains central to the idea of democracy even in its inaccessibility; it is the thing democracy must simultaneously need, want, lack, and flee. To affirm the paradoxes that flow from such a picture, then, would not be a first step toward a more nuanced form of practice, attuned to its own limitations; instead, such theoretical affirmations of paradox would be among the causes and the signs of our practical paralysis. To spell out this possibility, and to prepare the ground for a parallel diagnosis of the broader problem I have described in Arendt’s larger theory of action, we need to take up her account of “beginning” in more detail.

## WHAT IS BEGINNING?

Given the unusual nature of Arendt’s critique of rule—and given, in particular, her insistence on linking “beginning” back to words such as *archê* and *archein* that have come to suggest the stifling of novelty—we should expect that her appeals to the phenomenon of beginning will turn out to be more than just an effort to rehabilitate unruliness. However, it is not obvious what else “beginning” could mean. Arendt’s readers typically suppose that the paradigmatic instance of beginning is an act that *interrupts* an existing series or a given

order (see, e.g., Beiner 1984, 355; d'Entrèves 1994, 68), and thus that beginning is, precisely, that which is closed down by rule—by the making of decisions, the application of principles, the consolidation of identities, the issuing of commands. Arendt's work sometimes seems to support this understanding of beginning: in "What is Freedom," for instance, she seems to contrast action, in the sense of beginning, with the operation of "automatic processes," which generate only "stagnation" and "petrification" (Arendt 1968, 168–69). Against this background, she says, a new beginning "breaks into the world"; it is experienced as an "infinite improbability" (169). Such characterizations echo Arendt's phenomenology of "natality," which is her name for that aspect of the human condition in virtue of which we possess "the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (Arendt 1958, 9). This condition is manifest in those acts in which "something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before"; which take place "against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability" (1958, 178). Beginning thus understood refers to a human possibility that is the very opposite of regularity: it means, as James Tully (1999) puts it, "the freedom of speaking and acting *differently* in the course of the game" (164, emphasis added).

One problem with this reading, however, is that it treats Arendt's concepts of beginning and natality as something akin to restrictive clauses in grammar—that is, as qualifications that pick out the particular subset of human acts that actualize the power to break with an existing series or pattern. The trouble with that approach is twofold. The first issue has to do with the formal function of the concept of action (with which beginning and natality are associated) in Arendt's text: Arendt's famous triad of "labor," "work," and "action" does not operate straightforwardly as a set of categories into which different instances of human activity are to be sorted; indeed, she herself suggests that activities may belong to more than one of these at once.<sup>10</sup> (As I have suggested, however, it seems equally problematic to think of these categories as something like a set of dimensions that inhere in *every* instance of human activity, because part of the point of the book seems to be to warn against the loss of certain capacities or possibilities; if that's right, then there must be *something* restrictive about these concepts. I shall return to this problem.) The second issue is substantive: at crucial points, Arendt says things that seem inconsistent with the conventional reading of beginning or natality as the power to break with a series, change direction, or act differently. Consider a passage from "Understanding and Politics," one of the most important transitional essays Arendt wrote after the publication of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, as she was undertaking the work on the tradition of political philosophy that would eventually

find expression in *The Human Condition*. After criticizing appeals to laws of cause and effect in historical writing, Arendt offers a different characterization of the task of the historian:

Just as in our personal lives our worst fears and best hopes will never adequately prepare us for what actually happens—because the moment even a foreseen event takes place, everything changes, and we can never be prepared for the inexhaustible literalness of this "everything"—so each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins. It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected *new* with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance. (1994, 320)

What is crucial about this passage is the puzzling claim that a kind of unexpectedness and novelty—which Arendt immediately equates with "*archê*" and "beginning," and ties not just to the activity of the historian but also to political science and political action (Arendt 1994, 320–21)—is a feature of *all* events, including those that are hoped, feared, or foreseen. Several years later, Arendt (1968) amplifies the same thought in "What is Freedom," where she writes that "every act" is, from a certain perspective, a "miracle"; and that "it is because of this element of the 'miraculous' present in all reality that events, no matter how well anticipated in fear or hope, strike us with a shock of surprise once they have come to pass" (169–70).

In what sense could something "foreseen" or "anticipated" nevertheless also be "unexpected"? Arendt's point cannot be to claim that even those things of which we *count* ourselves certain are, as matters of scientific fact, uncertain, or that even those acts that conform to our expectations count as beginnings if the agent could have chosen to act differently: even to dwell on the margins of error in our expectations, or on the space of underdetermination, is still to remain in the register of cause and effect, and that, she insists, is never enough to account for the phenomenon of beginning (Arendt 1994, 319–20). Instead, her point is that when an event passes from possibility to actuality—regardless of how probable or improbable we may have taken it to be while it was still only a possibility—*something* changes in a different register; namely, the register in which happenings are not only caused states of affairs but also meaningful events, features of a world, and, in particular, occasions for response.<sup>11</sup> Even the most purely strategic kinds of response are crucially affected by the passage between the possible and the actual: what might have invited preemption or prevention now invites retaliation or compensation, for instance; and the significance of this difference is no less when it comes to other modes of response, from holding liable, to forgiving, to narrating, to thanking, to following, and so on. To say that *all* events exhibit unexpectedness in this sense, then, is to say that no degree of certainty about

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Arendt (1958, 182–83) says that action is typically "about some worldly objective reality" in addition to being "a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent," which suggests a kind of "overgrow[th]" of the work-world with the action-world, rather than a sharp separation between them (see Tsao 2002, 101).

<sup>11</sup> On the terms "occasion" and "response" in Arendt see Curtis 1999, chapter 5.

whether something will or will not happen, and what it will turn out to be, can smooth over the difference between “not yet” and “already.” Beginning is tied to the perspective or stance in which *that* difference matters: the novelty of a new beginning, its eruptiveness, arises not out of the degree of qualitative difference it manifests with respect to what has come before, as though the features of this act were being compared with the features of its predecessors by a neutral observer of history, standing outside of time, but precisely out of an agent’s attunement to its character as an irrevocable event, and therefore also as a new point of departure.<sup>12</sup>

Some further evidence for this way of understanding beginning comes from the fact that it helps make sense of Arendt’s characterization of natality as a *condition* of human life, rather than as a feature of human nature or a property of the will. Although Arendt’s capsule account of natality is well known, it is also deceptively simple. The word “natality” refers to the fact that human beings are born; at the same time, it refers to the capacity of human beings to engage in action—to give birth, as it were, to new beginnings (Arendt 1958, 8–9, 177). These two senses of natality are, somehow, connected: we are “newcomers and beginners *by virtue of birth*”; our words and deeds are “like a second birth” (176, 177, emphasis added). That connection is captured in Arendt’s beloved passage from Augustine—“that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody”—which means, on her gloss, that “with the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the precise nature of this connection is uncertain. If we lean toward a literal reading of Arendt’s deployment of Augustine, we might take her to mean that the power of beginning is a faculty each human being possesses, implanted in us with the creation of the species and passed on from generation to generation; but that would seem to be a claim about human *nature*—that is, about the essential properties that mark us off as beings of a certain kind, rather than the basic structures of our existence, which are not *in us*. Conversely, if we incline toward a less literal reading of the passage from Augustine, matters are not much better. If Arendt simply means that the biblical account of creation is a vivid metaphor which figures the subsequent birth of each individual human being, and if she means, in turn, that the phenomenon of beginning as manifest in action is *like* both of these sorts of “birth,” then “natality” would seem to be little more than an analogy, useful, perhaps, for drawing attention to a certain human capacity, but not a *condition* of anything.

There is another possibility, however. If, as I have suggested, the phenomenon of action as beginning turns not on the degree of qualitative difference between one state of affairs and its predecessor, but rather on the irreducible further difference introduced by the happening, the actuality, of every event, then to call

natality in the sense of birth a “condition” of beginning would be to say that birth is the fundamental phenomenon on the basis of which *this* difference becomes meaningful: it is that in virtue of which the actuality of events acquires its weight. This reading seems to be confirmed by Arendt’s account of the phenomenon of time. The individual life-story, she says, which has a beginning and an end, is “distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life” (Arendt 1958, 19). Birth and death, in other words, are the conditions of the experience of linear time.<sup>14</sup> This is why Arendt calls the appearance and disappearance of individual human beings the “*supreme events*” (97, emphasis added). It is also why she ties action, in the sense of a new beginning, so closely to what she calls the “disclosure” of the uniqueness of the individual agent (175ff): not, as is sometimes supposed, because action necessarily expresses an individualistic or self-centered attitude on the part of the actor, but simply because she thinks that the lives of distinct persons, whose beginnings and ends are the markers that lend our experience of time its linear character, are for this reason the medium of action: the points into which meaning gathers and from which it disperses, dependent on but never determined by the initiative of individuals.<sup>15</sup>

On Arendt’s understanding, then, beginning is by no means only manifest in acts that depart from an existing series or constitute a “radical break with our ordinary expectations” (Beiner 1984, 355). Instead, the term “beginning” points to a kind of novelty that can also be present in moments that satisfy our expectations, follow existing patterns, or continue observable regularities, but which comes into view only from a stance of practical engagement with events. Correspondingly, the reason the dominance of the concept of rule tends to obscure beginning is not that beginning is diametrically opposed to the phenomena conventionally associated with rule, because nothing about beginning requires a break with the terms of an existing order, or resistance to regularity as such. Rather, the concept of rule obscures beginning by blocking this posture of practical attunement; and it can do so in more than one way. By teaching us to associate phenomena such as regularity and continuity with hierarchical relations of command and obedience, the idea of rule can encourage the sort of withdrawal from practical engagement that is required to maintain the illusion of mastery

<sup>14</sup> This point is suggested by Bowen-Moore (1989), who says that “man and temporality are affirmed by the miracle of birth”; but she more often stresses the opposite thought, that beginning involves the insertion of a human being into an already-existing “time continuum” (22–23).

<sup>15</sup> As others have shown, we can also understand the relationship of beginning to birth in Arendt by seeing “birth” as the paradigmatic case of an “event” to which the actor responds: as Arendt (1958) says, in action we “confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (176). On this view, as Collin (1999) emphasizes, the importance of the moment of birth lies not in its association with a spontaneous “creation” but in its exemplification of the givenness to which action is always a response (106; see also Durst 2004).

<sup>12</sup> This seems close to what Stanley Cavell (1987) means by “presentness” (118–19). On the “event” as involving a “strange coincidence” of expectation and surprise, see Dastur 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt 1958, 177; Arendt 1968, 167; 1994, 321.

(Arendt 1958, 222–23). However, the same background assumption of a close connection between subordination and regularity can equally well inform democratic *critiques* of rule, leading us to embrace a countervailing commitment to openness and interruption—which, however, we seem to be tragically bound to violate every time we make a decision, indeed every time we move in one direction rather than in another, and which can therefore produce paralysis.

Still, all this leaves us with some unanswered questions about Arendt's conception of beginning. The source of the eruptiveness of beginning in Arendt's sense lies in what I called "our attunement" to events—but this phrase glosses over some difficulties too quickly. Whose "attunement"? What is attunement, anyway? Does this just mean that something is a beginning if the person who undertakes it thinks it is? Or if he or she has some other kind of mental state in relation to other events in the world? These answers might seem to constitute a way to deal with the formal problem about the nature of the category of "action" that I bracketed earlier: perhaps Arendt's apparent hesitation between an inclusive use of that category, in which every instance of activity can be seen from the perspective of action, and a restrictive use of that category, in which action names something we are in danger of losing, can be resolved by thinking of action as an attitude or stance that is available to be taken toward any activity, but which we do not necessarily always take up. The turn to the difference between possibility and actuality in this idea is right, but the implicit intellectualism is misleading, to the extent that it suggests either that it is an actor's mental states that determine whether his or her activity counts as action, and also to the extent that it suggests that the recovery of action might simply be a matter of theoretical reflection, of seeing what we are always already doing *as* action in a way that leaves the shape of our activity untouched. To see why, to develop a fuller account of what it is that makes a beginning a beginning, and to prepare the way for a return to democratic theory, we need to go back to Arendt's text, approaching the problem this time via the intersection between the ideas of action and rule.

## ACTION AND RULE: ARENDT'S DANTE

The chapter on action in *The Human Condition* begins with two epigraphs. The first, from Isak Dinesen, reads: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." The second, from the first book of Dante's *De Monarchia*, is printed first in Latin and then in Arendt's own English translation:

*Nam in omni actione principaliter intenditur ab agente, sive necessitate naturae sive voluntarie agat, propriam similitudinem explicare; unde fit quod omne agens, in quantum huiusmodi, delectatur; quia, cum omne quod est appetat suum esse, ac in agendo agentis esse modammodo amplietur, sequitur de necessitate delectatio. . . . Nihil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet.*

For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free

will, is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; since everything that it desires its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows. . . . Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self (Arendt 1958, 175).

In a recent study of Arendt, Susannah Gottlieb has begun to unpack the meaning of these epigraphs, and of the passage from Dante in particular. Noting the irony involved in Arendt's use of a passage drawn from a philosophical defense of universal monarchy, Gottlieb (2003) brilliantly tracks the ways in which Arendt turns Dante's passage into "a plea for a nonmonarchical politics," a transformation that, she observes, turns on a distinctive translation of Dante's "*explicare*" as well as a mistranslation of the crucial last sentence (163). Yet there are further layers of significance in this epigraph that Gottlieb leaves unexplored. One of these comes into view when we notice the importance of the concept of rule in Dante's work. Although he uses a variety of other terms to refer to political authority, including *monarchia*, *imperium*, *regnum*, and related words, he also frequently calls the monarch *princeps* and his rule *principatus*, which suggests a connection between monarchy and the "principle," *principium*, of humanity (Dante, *De Monarchia* 1.2 [1998]). Indeed, Dante's defense of monarchy rests on his claim that a single, universal *princeps* is uniquely able to produce peace, which is the prerequisite of the fulfillment of the *principium* of humankind. Moreover, unlike many other terms for political authority, *princeps*- words—which were used to render *archê* and related terms in medieval Latin translations of Greek texts—also bear some of the same semantic complexity that Arendt finds in *archê* and *archein*: *princeps* can also mean first in time; and both *principatus* and, more commonly, *principium* can refer to a beginning or origin (Lewis and Short 1879).<sup>16</sup> Against this background, it seems plausible to treat Arendt's brief but rich engagement with Dante as an extension of her critical engagement with the ideas of rule and beginning.

Another layer of significance in the epigraph becomes visible when we attend to the role of Aristotle in the first book of *De Monarchia*, and in particular to Dante's use of categories drawn from Aristotle's philosophy. Dante's inquiry into the principle of humankind takes the form of an investigation of humankind's highest power (*potentia*); the principle—that is, for Dante, the goal or end—of humanity is to actualize this potential (*actuare*, also *reducere de potentia in actum*, "reduce" from potential to act; 1.4.1, 1.3.8 [1998]). Among the functions of the monarch is to "dispose" (*disponere*) humankind rightly for this task, which involves a kind of arrangement and ordering of humanity that strengthens certain human potentials (and weakens others)—for instance, by intensifying the power of justice and minimizing the power of greed (1.11, 1.13 [1998]). And the passage

<sup>16</sup> For Arendt's recovery of the language of "principle" see, for example, 1968, 152.

that Arendt uses as her epigraph is drawn from that section of *De Monarchia* in which Dante argues that the monarch is best able to dispose others well in this way (1.13.1–3 [1998])—an argument that turns explicitly on a citation of Aristotle’s account of potentiality and actuality (*dunamis* and *energeia*) in the *Metaphysics*. Perhaps, then, Arendt’s use of Dante is also tied to her own, distinctive use of Aristotle’s metaphysical vocabulary in the chapter on action—for instance, in her account of the relationship between power (*dunamis*) and activity (*energeia*; Arendt 1958, 199–206 and *passim*).

Gottlieb’s reading of Arendt’s epigraph begins with an observation about her translation of Dante’s “*explicare*” in the phrase “*propriam similitudinem explicare*,” which Arendt renders as “the disclosure of his own image.” Gottlieb (2003) writes that “*explicare* (‘uncoiling’ or ‘unfolding’) can characterize a purely internal occurrence—and this is indeed the direction of Dante’s thought as he seeks to justify the institution of monarchy”; for this reason, Gottlieb argues, Arendt’s translation of *explicare* as “disclosure” shatters Dante’s solipsism, highlighting the fact of plurality, the existence of others to whom the agent’s disclosure is directed (162). At first glance, the suggestion that Dante’s analysis is “entirely absorbed with the relation of the agent to itself” might seem to be mistaken: after all, in this chapter of the *Monarchia*, Dante is concerned precisely with the power of the monarch to shape and dispose *others*, and he has already characterized humanity as a “multitude”; correspondingly, Dante’s translators render “*propriam similitudinem explicare*” as to “reproduce” or “replicate its own likeness.”<sup>17</sup> But Gottlieb’s point is, presumably, that this posture—not so much total self-absorption as infinite self-propagation—doesn’t really count as a relation to *others*. There is no acknowledgment of separateness here—not even in the term “multitude,” which has a very different meaning in the medieval Aristotelian tradition than it does for contemporary radical democrats. As Richard Kay observes, in that tradition *multitudo* “signifies that which can be divided ‘according to its potency’ into discontinuous parts,” that is, something that cannot realize its full potential except as a functionally differentiated but interlocking and integrated plurality (Dante 1998, 19 n. 5). *This* plurality is merely the effect of the self-division of the one; correspondingly, the multitude is best disposed when—through subjection to a monarch—it approximates the unity of God, for “the whole universe is nothing else than a sort of footprint of the divine goodness” (1.8.2 [1998]).

Gottlieb then goes on to discuss the rendering of the last sentence of the epigraph, “*nihil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet*,” which Arendt translates as “thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self.” As Gottlieb (2003) notes, and as the context indicates, this is evidently a mistranslation (162); Shaw’s edition has “nothing acts unless it has the

qualities which are to be communicated to the thing acted upon” (Dante 1.13.3 [1996]); and Kay’s translation reads “nothing acts unless it is already what the patient ought to become” (Dante 1.13.3 [1998]). What, exactly, has Arendt done? Because the “patient” or the “thing acted upon” is the *patiens*, Gottlieb (2003) concludes that Arendt has transformed “*patiens*” into “patent” by “subtracting an *i*” (162). This cannot be right, however, for it leaves us with no plausible account of where Arendt finds “latent” in this sentence, or of what she would mean by that word. It seems more likely that Arendt has read “*existere*” as “to make patent,” and “*patiens*” as “the latent self,” in which case her crucial departure from Dante would lie not in dropping an “*i*” but in tying *existens* and *patiens* to the same subject, rather than treating *patiens* as the separate recipient of the actor’s action. (From two subjects to one: it is Arendt, notice, who is letting herself be absorbed into the question of the agent’s self-relation—but sometimes it may be more effective to approach plurality indirectly.)

The first part of this hypothesis is plausible enough, for *existere* can mean to be, but also to emerge, appear, or be made manifest; and it would be no surprise for Arendt, the student of Heidegger, to stress these latter senses.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, both parts of the hypothesis receive some support and elaboration later in Arendt’s discussion of action, when she says that “the meaning of the last sentence of the Dante quotation at the head of this chapter,” which “defies translation,” is as follows: “The human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow” (Arendt 1958, 208). Here, Arendt unpacks “the latent self” into an even richer notion, “what one has to suffer passively anyhow”; and *that* phrase is identifiably a rendering—albeit a misrendering, ungrammatical and unmoored from the context of Dante’s words—of *tale . . . quale patiens fieri debere*.

Reading Arendt’s mistranslation this way has a chain of important consequences. The first is that it clarifies what Arendt means here by “the latent self.” When Arendt’s Dante says that “nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self,” it is tempting to think of this as a kind of unveiling: the identity of the self rests, fully formed but unseen, under the cover of darkness, until the actor steps into the light of the public, putting his *persona*—carefully crafted back in the private workshop—on public display. Yet Arendt’s own comments about the “non-sovereign” character of action belie this reading. “Nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed and word,” she says (Arendt 1958, 180): and this is because this

<sup>17</sup> For “multitude,” see Dante 1998, 1.3.8; “reproduce” is Shaw’s translation of *explicare* (Dante 1996); “replicate,” Kay’s (Dante 1998).

<sup>18</sup> As Shadi Bartsch has pointed out to me, on this reading Arendt is also mistranslating *existere* by treating it as a transitive verb; but this, too, seems like a plausible mistranslation to ascribe to her, since one way to read her larger philosophical point is that the kind of “existence” involved in acting is not self-contained but involves a practical relation to circumstances and events.

“who” is formed in the crucible of disclosure itself, where it is shaped by the unpredictable reactions it provokes; the “unchangeable identity of the person” only comes into being as such in retrospect, once an actor’s life “has come to its end” (193; see also 233–34). Does this mean, then, that the “latent self” in this epigraph is merely the symptom of a kind of ideological misrecognition, the falsely naturalized sediment of a series of performatives, which good Arendtian political actors should attempt to expose as such and to resist (Honig 1992, 1993)? Yes and no: *sometimes* the rhythm of Arendtian beginning may involve making spaces for subversion of existing norms, or for the creation of something that looks substantially different from what has preceded it, but, as we have seen, such unruliness isn’t constitutive of what it means to be engaged in action on Arendt’s account; and anyway Arendt’s talk of “making patent,” “making articulate,” and “calling into full existence” do not fit well with the thought that “the latent self” is a misrecognition to be unmasked.

The phrase “what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow,” however, suggests another possibility, one that lies outside this all-too-familiar dichotomy between the self as settled in advance and the self, if it can still be called that, as in perpetual flux. It suggests that what Arendt calls the latent self is not an *identity*, real or illusory: instead, it is action’s point of departure, the constellation of circumstances, events, and forces to which each new act is a response. To say that this is not a *real* identity is to say that action, in responding to such a point of departure, always does more than merely reveal an always already established character; to say that it is not an *illusory* identity is to say that this point of departure cannot be unmasked—to do that would be like pulling oneself out of that matrix in which there are occasions to do things, in which acting makes sense at all. Of course, because circumstances, events, and forces are usually things that we regard as external to the self, it may seem problematic to say that they are among the self’s constituents: doing so may seem to still seem to dissolve the self into its surroundings. Yet it is important to notice that Arendt’s account of the latent self is not reductive in this way: for her, we might say, the latent self exists at—indeed, it *is*—the intersection between these worldly happenings and circumstances, on the one hand, and the biologically individuated human beings for whom they are meaningful, whose bodily trajectories from birth to death serve as the threads that organize this latent stuff into *selves* and make it possible to speak intelligibly of an individual actor’s initiatory response to the circumstances and events with which he or she is confronted (and which will turn out to have made up part of the story of who he or she is).

All of this suggests that there is a close connection between Arendt’s account of the “latent” self, that in relation to which one is *patiens*, on the one hand, and the idea of the event that I spelled out earlier, on the other. Yet there is also a subtle temporal twist here. Recall that what makes a beginning a beginning for Arendt, what lends it its eruptiveness, is not its degree of departure from what preceded it, but rather our at-

tunement to its character as an irrevocable event, which also means: as an occasion for response. This suggests that the status of being a beginning is not acontextual: beginnings are always beginnings *for* some agent or agents; specifically, for those from whom the beginning calls for a response. Now, however, Arendt has also told us that what it means to act is to “call into full existence” something that one would otherwise merely suffer passively. To do that, it would seem, is precisely to be attuned to the character of this latent stuff as a set of irrevocable events and an occasion for action. There is no way to undo what has been done, no way *not* to suffer it—but you can do more than *merely* suffer it: you can take it as your point of departure. You can, in short, begin. Taking these two points together: what makes an act an instance of beginning? That, against its background, someone begins. What makes *that* a beginning? That it becomes an occasion to begin—and so on.

This temporal structure has several crucial implications. Notice, first, that it immediately does away with the notion that the question of whether an instance of activity is a beginning might be decided by the attitude or mental state of its agent. To the contrary, whether your activity is a beginning is not wholly under your control: it is, instead, a matter of the character of the responses and reactions it provokes (or fails to provoke) in you and others. In this sense, the structure of intersubjective vulnerability that Arendt discusses in *The Human Condition* under such rubrics as the “boundlessness” and “unpredictability” of action applies to more than just individual instances of action: *it also applies to the very status of action as action*. Second, this also suggests that the being of beginnings is a *public* matter—not in the sense that it is to be decided by rational-critical discourse, nor in the sense that it is a question of the common good rather than the private interest, nor in the sense that it involves the exposure of a hidden truth—but simply in the sense that it is a worldly phenomenon, which only exists in the sometimes face-to-face, sometimes impersonal, but always uncertain circulation of address and response (Warner 2002). Third, it also indicates that the being of a beginning is actually *not* best conceived as a state. Action, understood as beginning, is an ongoing activity whose future is uncertain—and indeed whose past is in a certain sense uncertain as well, insofar as the character of one act as a beginning hangs on its future reception. For this reason it might be better to speak of action as something that is, at various times and places, coming into being or passing away, as the intensity of responsiveness in a space of potential circulation waxes and wanes, but which never simply or definitively *is*.

We are now in a position to return to the interpretive problem deferred earlier, about the curious difficulty in knowing whether Arendt means concepts like action and beginning to pick out a specific subset of human activity, or to point to a dimension of significance that might be found in *any* instance of human activity. This difficulty, recall, is closely related to the trouble readers of Arendt often have in finding a suitable criterion in her work by which to decide whether an example of

human activity *counts* as action. We should now be able to identify some of the sources of this trouble. First, it may sometimes be the result of a focus on relatively individualized examples of activity, abstracted from the sequences of occasion and response in which they are embedded. Such abstraction makes the examples more manageable, but it also extracts them from the contexts in relation to which Arendt's account of action as beginning makes sense: trying to decide whether *this* instance of activity, on its own, is a beginning is like trying to decide whether *this* instance of me flexing my knee, on its own, is running. Second, this difficulty is also the result of trying to *decide* whether an instance of activity is or is not a beginning, for beginning, as we have seen, isn't a finally settled property, but a possibility we actualize—though never completely—by responding to it. From the stance of the classifier, who sorts specimens of activity into categories, action and beginning are bound to seem paradoxical.

Together, these features of Arendt's account of beginning shed light on her transformative appropriation of Dante. As I indicated earlier, rule, on Dante's account, is a matter of the realization of the highest possibility of human beings through their "disposition" by a sovereign, who is himself already a maximal embodiment of the virtuous dispositions that remain merely possible—latent—in his subjects, and whose activity of disposition is a kind of reproduction of his own likeness in those he governs. This is why the passage Arendt mistranslates is so crucial to Dante's argument: "nothing acts unless it is already what the patient ought to become." Indeed, in the sentence immediately following this—which Arendt does not quote—Dante adds the authority of Aristotle to his conclusion: "This is why the Philosopher says in the *Metaphysics* that everything that is brought from potentiality into actuality is produced by something similar to itself that already exists in actuality; for if anything tried to act otherwise, it would try in vain" (1.13.3 [1998]).<sup>19</sup> The passage to which Dante seems to be referring is part of Aristotle's account of the various ways in which actuality, *energeia*, is prior to potentiality, *dunamis*. For example, "the actual member of the species is prior to the potential member of the same species," and helps to produce it: "man [is produced] by man, musician by musician."<sup>20</sup> Or again, in a slightly different sense, actuality is prior to potentiality in the sense that the actuality of a thing is its end, and the end, as that for the sake of which the thing is, is prior to the thing qua potentiality: hence "animals do not see in order that they may have sight, but have sight that they may see" (Aristotle, *Meta.* 1050a7–11 [1984]). Dante here translates such ideas about the priority of actuality into a doctrine of hierarchical rule, treating the monarch as, at once, the one who activates the potentiality of the

multitude (as the one who disposes) and the one who *defines* its potentiality (as the embodiment of the *telos* of human beings).

By contrast, Arendt's mistranslation of Dante is a perfect miniature of her critique of the concept of rule in the philosophical tradition. Dante's separation of the monarch from the multitude—expressed in the conventional translation of the crucial sentence, in which *existens* and *patiens* relate to two separate subjects—is an example of the breakdown of the original interdependence between beginner and responder, and of the transformation of that relationship into the *Herrschaft* exercised by one who already knows what is to be done (who is always already actual) over one who obeys (who has to be brought from potentiality to actuality). In collapsing *existens* and *patiens* back into the "patent" and "latent" selves of a single agent—the action one undertakes, and the constellation of irrevocable events within which, and in response to which, one takes it—Arendt peremptorily denies the claim of *any* agent to be a full embodiment, always already actualized, of human potentiality. In so doing, she also tacitly rejects the reading of Aristotle on which Dante relies. Whereas Dante tends to understand *energeia* as *actuality* in the sense of a state of complete development or perfection, Arendt restores to that concept its association with *activity*: as Aristotle also says, it is because of the priority of *energeia* to *dunamis* that we say that "it is thought impossible to be a builder if one has built nothing or a harpist if one has never played the harp; for he who learns to play the harp learns to play by playing it, and all other learners do similarly" (*Meta.* 1049b, 30–32 [1984]). Here, as in the case of beginning, to be "actual" is not to have a certain set of qualities at a particular time, nor is it to realize a possibility always already implanted in you. It is, instead, to be engaged in an activity, making and remaking (in ways at once orderly *and* unruly) that activity and its possibilities as you proceed, and sustaining your attunement to the events that call for your response.

## CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY'S BEGINNING

Although Hannah Arendt was not a democratic theorist in the usual sense of the term—indeed, her occasional remarks about the reality of democratic politics in the twentieth century were often unflattering—her critique of rule and her unorthodox interpretation of beginning have much to offer democratic theory, because they invite us to think differently about the nature of the political activity we ascribe to "the people." Different characterizations of this activity, as we have seen, produce starkly different versions of the democratic ideal: sometimes we imagine the people jointly ruling themselves, in control of their own destinies, free from subjection to alien forces or sinister interests; at other times we imagine the people insurgent, rising up in opposition to a regime or order, and so displaying the irreducibility of popular power to a fixed form. Arendt herself has been enlisted in support of both sorts of democratic vision; yet from her

<sup>19</sup> Some editions have Dante quoting Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1049b24–2 (1984), for example Dante 1996; Kay (Dante 1998, 70–71 n. 6) suggests that Dante was merely paraphrasing Aristotle.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1049b19–20, 25 (1984). The following discussion is especially indebted to conversations with Jill Frank and to Frank 2004.

perspective, I have suggested, these positions are equally problematic—and not because of the distance between them, but because of what they share. To conceive of democratic politics as the rule of the people over itself is, she claims, to reduce it to a variation on monarchy, in which the “collective body” of the people takes the place of the king (Arendt 1958, 221); to conceive of it as the perpetual interruption or destabilization of order is merely to invert this picture of politics as rule, reducing freedom to a matter of “liberation” (1965, 142)—in many circumstances a worthwhile aim, but one that, when generalized into the defining feature of political action as such, seems to demand an impossible escape from the contexts in which action is situated and which give it sense. Neither seeking a middle ground between these positions nor affirming them as the poles of a constitutive paradox, Arendt instead and more radically draws our attention to a dimension of activity that they jointly obscure, one defined not by the opposition between determination and underdetermined spontaneity, but by the complementarity between events and the responses they occasion, provoke, or summon.<sup>21</sup>

What does this view of political activity mean for our understanding of democratic politics? To begin with, it highlights a distinctive way in which democratic political activity can be obstructed or impeded, thereby providing political theorists and actors with a new target for, and language of, democratic critique. We are used to thinking of the impediments to democracy as, on the one hand, forces that interfere with the autonomous self-determination of the people, or, on the other hand, forces that constrict the space of underdetermination in which popular action can operate, for instance by channeling it into a constitutional form. From an Arendtian perspective, however, the most fundamental threat to democratic political activity lies in the loss of responsiveness to events: the erosion of the contexts in which action makes sense. To experience an event—if “experience” is the right word—as irrelevant; to have it be imperceptibly distant (whether at a distance of one mile or a thousand); for it to signify for *only* as an observation or datum, made from a posture of scientific disengagement; for it to be imperceptibly close, so much the medium of your being that it never occurs to you that it might be something to which you *could* respond; to feel it as a force that rips up, or rips you out of, the contexts in which you might be able to imagine *how* to respond; to experience an event generically, as something significant for you only insofar as you belong to a category or type, which does not engage you as the locus of a separate, as-yet-unfinished life: these are signs of the

contraction of the dimension of activity that concerns Arendt; and they become particularly significant for democracy when they systematically characterize the experience either of citizens generally or of a subset of citizens disproportionately.

To conceive of the impediments to democracy in these terms is, crucially, to locate them in the mode of presence or appearance of events, and not merely in the states or capacities of persons. In mainstream, regime-oriented democratic theory, the failure of democratic rule is often cast as a failure in or of the citizens who exercise democratic rule: for democratic government to be genuinely autonomous *self*-government, the citizen body must form a “people” that possesses and displays a general will, without lapsing into irrationality or partiality—but the prior work of molding and forming that this requires may belie the autonomy it is supposed to produce (Keenan 2003; Honig 2001). Likewise, for democratic critics of rule, genuinely democratic agency lies in a power of spontaneous interruption that needs somehow to be awakened or instilled in those who are subject to the controlling force of regimes—but the very nature of spontaneity so conceived makes it difficult in principle to locate or produce. Both of these approaches, however, render it difficult to understand how democratic activity might be generated when or where it is weak or absent, for they imagine that what makes action democratic is a one or another kind of purity at its origin. Arendt’s account of beginning, by contrast, shows us that action, as a response to events, is, you might say, always a *second* step rather than a first: if we can never quite lose our capacity to act altogether (Arendt 1958, 323; Pitkin 1998, 282), this is because there never ceases to be a fund of doings and happenings—beginnings—in the world to which we might respond.<sup>22</sup> Arendt thus replaces the unanswerable question of how to generate something (autonomy, spontaneity) from nothing (heteronomy, determination) with the more tractable question of how to sustain, intensify, and democratize the beginnings with which we are already confronted; and that is less a question about the qualities or virtues of persons than about the worldly intersections *among* persons, or between persons and the happenings they encounter, or fail to.

Importantly, identifying breakdowns of the nexus of event and response is not a matter of the top-down application of an authoritative philosophical criterion: just as, for Arendt, the status of human activity as “action” cannot be apprehended from the disengaged stance of the classifier, the significance of events is also a matter of judgment, and, often enough, a matter for dispute, undertaken within the horizons of practical

<sup>21</sup> Insofar as our neglect of this dimension of activity is itself part of the legacy of the concept of rule and of the relationships of subordination it has been employed to rationalize, Arendt’s (1958) effort to recover this distinctive perspective on activity is already antihierarchical and egalitarian in spirit: hence her insistence that the “attempt to replace acting with making is manifest in the whole body of arguments against ‘democracy,’ which, the more consistently and better reasoned it is, will turn into an argument against the essentials of politics” (220).

<sup>22</sup> As Pitkin (1998) puts it, “the only place to begin is where we are, and there are a hundred ways of beginning” (283). Perhaps because Pitkin casts beginning as what I have called a “first” step rather than as a “response,” however, her account of Arendtian action sometimes sounds like an invocation of spontaneity: “if you wait for your own action to befall you, it will not; you have to just do it” (284), and “once we do begin . . . we may find others already under way” (283). Yet it is also because things—events—befall us, and because we encounter others already under way, that we have occasions and ways to begin.

engagement. Some of the most important work of democratic politics thus consists in the interpretation of particular events; that is, in the re-presentation of happenings that, although they may or may not be widely known as matters of fact, are not (as) widely experienced as practically significant. This does not mean, however, that theoretical reflection has no role to play here. The patterns of engagement and responsiveness we confront are not merely accidental: they are, in part, the effects of social and political practices and institutions, which structure and mediate people's experiences of the world. In addition to (and often in conjunction with) the public interpretation of particular events, then, the problem of democratic political activity can be engaged at a higher level of generality, by asking how these practices and institutions expose us to the imperatives of events or render them practically inert. This is in part a question of the responsiveness institutions foster or suppress toward the work they themselves perform: institutions may be more or less peremptory, more or less dependent for their successful operation upon their insulation from the engagement, whether cooperative or critical, of those whom they affect.<sup>23</sup> Yet practices and institutions—and not just institutions with formalized decision-making powers—also have much wider consequences for the shape of political activity. The contours of the built environment, the aesthetics of print, televisual, and electronic media; the discursive forms through which events are distinguished, measured, scaled, organized, and presented; the practices of representation and patterns of identification that make some events but not others “our” business: these are among the mechanisms of what Susan Bickford calls “attention orientation,” which may heighten or diminish responsiveness to events as Arendt understands it.<sup>24</sup> They are properly objects of democratic criticism not because they produce order and stability but—in keeping with Arendt's distinctive critique of rule—just insofar as they predicate the order and stability they produce on the narrowing of some or all citizens' practical horizons.

We can see an example of this way of thinking about institutions in Arendt's own writing, when, near the end of *On Revolution* and after an extensive discussion of the failure of the American founders and their successors to preserve the “revolutionary spirit,” she waxes enthusiastic about Jefferson's unrealized “ward system”—a division of the nation into local “elementary republics”—and, relatedly, about the council movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Arendt 1965, 248ff). From the point of view

<sup>23</sup> It is at this point that Arendt's concerns would intersect fruitfully with the tradition of participatory democratic theory, although (as Archon Fung has recently noted) much of that tradition focuses on citizens' participation in “moments of initial decision” rather than on their responses to those decisions and their ongoing involvement in what the “postdecision” phases of the operation of institutions—(Fung 2004, 232)—a focus that Arendt might suggest is an artifact of our continuing tendency to see political institutions primarily as sites of rule.

<sup>24</sup> Bickford's (2000, 356) focus here is the democratic significance of city spaces.

of mainstream accounts of democracy as a form of rule, Arendt's invocation of the ward system and council movement would look like a call—perhaps nostalgic and unrealistic—for a return to direct popular decision-making. For much radical democratic theory, the wards would seem instead to be mechanisms of popular unruliness: Arendt herself notes that Jefferson saw wards as a “non-violent alternative” to revolution (250). Recall, however, that in *On Revolution*, Arendt claims that the American revolutionaries failed to comprehend the nature of their own experiences, in part because they “channelled” those experiences “into concepts that had just been vacated” (155)—a phrase that should remind us of Lefort's story of democratic revolution as an evacuation of the “place of power.” For Arendt, the paradoxes in which the revolutionaries came to feel themselves caught—including especially the apparently intractable conflict between permanence and novelty, exemplified by Jefferson's own oscillation from an “identification of action with rebellion” to an “identification with founding anew and building up” (234)—are the symptoms of a “fallacy” in their thought that “becloud[ed]” their understanding of action (133). They failed to take the measure of the fact that their own revolutionary activity, although not determined in advance, had not appeared out of nowhere: sensitized to the abuses of Crown and Parliament, they had set out to restore their traditional liberties but found themselves, in response both to events and to the “charms” they discovered in action itself, doing far more than they had intended (33, 28–29, 37). If, as Arendt suggests, the ward system represents an unfollowed route that might have helped to preserve political freedom, this is neither because the wards would have institutionalized popular sovereignty nor because they would have generated rebelliousness, but because they would have organized political experience so as to sustain the same kind of attunement to events that had drawn the revolutionaries into action, and along its path.

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