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[final draft]

Tentative Lessons of Experience: Arendt, Essayism, and "The Social" Reconsidered

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Hannah Arendt is one of the most referenced figures in contemporary political theory. Indeed, at least since the 1990s, it has been justifiable to talk about an “Arendt renaissance.”¹ However, some aspects of her thought remain enigmatic even for those specializing in her thinking. She, as Dana Villa writes, “remains an elusive figure.”² Many even of her most competent readers end up with some sort of *aporia* in regards to her theoretical position. Speaking of Arendt’s concept of the social, Hanna Pitkin writes: “why would a thinker whose intent is so clearly liberatory and empowering develop a concept so blatantly contrary to that intent?”³ Further questions include, taking but a few examples, How to reconcile her complex historical analyses with what seem to be categorical over-simplifications? How to cope with the “missing normative foundations” of Arendtian politics? Is she a foundationalist or an anti-foundationalist thinker?⁴ This article suggests that this puzzlement is produced by a lack of attention—both by Arendt herself and most of her commentators—to the *style* of her thinking, writing, and theorizing.⁵ To be more precise, the implications of the fact that Arendt understood political theory as a set of experience-based exercises—*essays* in the classical sense of the term—is often not sufficiently taken into account when discussing different dimensions of her thought.

This also impacts the interpretations given to Arendt’s substantially political writings. If the essayistic, that is to say temporal and experimental, nature of Arendt’s thought is not sufficiently reckoned with, almost all of her concepts become prone to counterproductive misreadings. Even distinguished interpreters such as Seyla Benhabib or Hanna Pitkin sometimes fail to notice the full significance of this notion. Further, while the role of experiences for Arendt’s thinking is often emphasized, it is quite often also undermined so that her personal experiences are treated as source for her theoretical views, which, in turn, are treated as a theoretical system like any other. Thus, the role of experience per se in her thinking is left unexamined. A tendency persists, moreover, to produce overly “textual” readings of Arendt by failing to attend sufficiently to the worldly context

of her writings. In response, this article discusses the nature of theorizing in Arendt, emphasizing two points: the centrality of temporalized experience in her thought and her espousal of the essay as the literary form for political theory.

I will begin with a discussion of the crucial role given to the concrete experiences in Arendt's thought. In the secondary literature, the concept of experience is too often taken at face value, rather than as a substantial concept in need of serious attention. I therefore aim at explicating and clearing the meaning of experience in Arendt's theorizing. In the second section, I turn to the genre of her theorizing. The central features of Arendt's thinking, I claim, can best be grasped if we look at her theorizing as an essayistic exercise through and through. The essay has natural affinities to the experiential exercises in thought that Arendt carried out. Taking the essay—rather than, for instance, narratives—as the focus also changes our attitude towards her key concepts, fostering our understanding of them and their application to the contemporary political realities. This will be demonstrated in the final section, which takes up the most controversial of Arendt's terms: the social. If the concept is approached as an essayistic exercise rather than as a part of a rigid theoretical system, many of the problems associated with it dissolve.

Experience in the Arendtian Image of thought

During the last two decades, it has become more and more accepted that Arendt is not a traditional system-builder.⁶ Her overall intention as a theorist can be best understood as the formulation of a new *ethos* of political thinking. This *ethos* is characterized by three central features. First, it is and remains anchored in the concrete experiences and happenings of the political world. Second, and consequently, it is anti-metaphysical. It does not operate with traditional, timeless, ontological categories, or aim at laying down any permanent theorems. Lastly, the structure of Arendtian thinking is that of a temporal movement between past and future—accompanied by the claim that the tradition of political thought has come to its end. While already Tocqueville had noted how “the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future,”⁷ it was totalitarianism that, for Arendt, exploded the traditional categories of political thought.⁸ Nevertheless, the capacity of thought remained intact and in some sense the break with the tradition can even be read as a promise. If it was the function of the tradition to give answers by channeling questions into pre-given categories,⁹ perhaps the abyss is an opportunity for a “true political philosophy” that would proceed from speechless wonder (*thaumadzein*) in the face of human plurality.¹⁰ Arendt's starting point is the hope that “a being whose essence is beginning may have enough origin within himself to understand *without*

preconceived categories”¹¹—or as Arendt later preferred to put it: thinking of political experiences “without a bannister.”¹²

I will focus here on the experiential nature of Arendt’s thought. Her understanding of political theory is built on the conviction that thinking and theorizing can only arise “out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as *the only guidepost by which to take its bearings*.”¹³ It is the living present, concrete occurrences, and political realities that initiate trains of thought—as if the world itself called us to think: “What is the subject of our thought,” she once rhetorically asked and answered: “Experience! Nothing else! And if we lose the ground of experience then we get into all kinds of theories.”¹⁴ Further, she held that “events, past and present, . . . are the true, only reliable teachers of political scientists.”¹⁵ Every thought process thus has its origin and its central reference point in the political present. From there it reaches to the past and the future. According to Arendt, when thinking, that is, searching for meaning in “whatever is or occurs,”¹⁶ we are “remembering, collecting and recollecting what no longer is present out of “the belly of memory” (Augustine), anticipating and planning in the mode of willing what is not yet.”¹⁷

But what actually is experience? Even though Arendt’s personal experiences are often noted as the backbone of her theoretical writings, as in the works of Richard Bernstein, Margaret Canovan, and Steve Buckler,¹⁸ it is seldom—if ever—explicated what experience actually meant for her. Further, the attention is almost exclusively directed toward her biographical experiences rather than at the structural role of experience in her theorizing. While Pitkin writes, “Only when the . . . Grecophile concepts of *The Human Condition* are traced back to their roots in Arendt’s life do their true political significance and contemporary relevance emerge,”¹⁹ more accurate wording would be, I contend, “to their roots in actual, concrete political experiences, past and present.”

The first thing that needs to be clarified in terms of experience is its difference from the empiricist—and, in general, epistemological—conception. For Arendt, the concept of experience has barely anything to do with direct sense data, not to speak of inductive reasoning. In more general terms, experience is not something that can be fully grasped through the lenses of subject and object. It is collective: it is related to the common and shared political world and mediated through the *sensus communis*. It needs to be presentable in the form of a story—experience makes its appearance only when it is being said, becomes part of the discourse.²⁰ All this implies that experience in the Arendtian sense of the word always has a hermeneutical aspect to it. Experience, as Joan W. Scott argues in her classic article, “is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted.”²¹ It is already interpreted since once it reaches the active thinking-process, it has already been filtered through the preliminary common sense understanding of the event or happening in question, and fused with memories of past events and history.²²

Further, Arendt holds, following Augustine, that experience goes through a twofold transformation before entering the mind as a thought-object: it is first retained in the memory, and then remembered and brought into the thought-process.²³ Accordingly, because of its always-already interpreted nature, experience cannot function as a stable foundation of knowledge. Arendt is not vulnerable, therefore, to the criticism sometimes leveled against other experience-centered approaches.²⁴

It is especially the “objective,” common-world, aspect of experience that is sometimes lost when Arendt’s experiences are brought forth mainly as *her* experiences. Her conceptualization of experience is better understood as closely related to the Heideggerian *Erfahrung*, as an experience of “external, objective, events, and the lessons one learns from such events.”²⁵ This conceptualization is also related to Arendt’s understanding of criticism, drawn from her interpretation of Lessing’s *Selbstdenken* and the Jewish tradition of “pariahdom.”²⁶ She describes this attitude as assessing phenomena against their relations to the shared and plural human in-between. Criticism is also temporally shot through, reaching out of the present to both the past and the future, in the ultimate aim of becoming untimely against the present moment. This kind of critical mentality, which “never leaves the solid ground of the world,” can also never give rise to a definite world-view, “immune to further experiences in the world.”²⁷ The lesson we should draw from this, I want to argue, is that it is *the world*, not the thinker that is at the center of Arendt’s concept of experience.

Experience, for Arendt, is full of connections and inference. It calls for further interpretation. Therefore, as in the lexicon of the pre-philosophic Greek, theorizing is for Arendt an ongoing activity, not a result.²⁸ It is a constant attempt to understand in a more satisfying way what is going on in the world, not an endeavor for validating any fixed conclusions, such as a “system.” Or, to put it bluntly, theorizing is another name for thinking. It goes on until the theorist has run out of questions, which is not likely to happen given that every tentative answer raises a set of new questions. Thought and theorizing, then, reach towards infinity. It is here that we enter the nature of thinking as a temporal movement.

For Arendt, the activity of thinking takes place, in contradistinction to the views of the metaphysical tradition, not in some timeless and spaceless region, but in a curious break in time, that is, between the forces of the past and the forces of the future. The “continuously flowing stream of sheer change” is transformed into these two forces by the insertion of a human being into the middle. This is the situation we find ourselves in. The struggle with these two forces, Arendt argues, is the fundamental experience of thinking. Both forces are active, the former pressing the thinker forward, the latter blocking the road ahead and driving her/him back. Past, thus, is not a burden we

have to bear (Arendt quotes Faulkner's phrase: "the past is never dead, it is not even past"), nor is the future a static utopia. The fight against these active forces breaks the everyday flow of time, giving the thinker a space in which to move regardless of the ordinary temporal sequence of events.

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The meaning of whatever occurs in the present can only be acquired through a historical analysis, through placing it in a constellation with past experiences and ideas, and finally, through pondering its implications and potential trajectories for the future, or the possibilities disclosed by it. Thus, experience itself, for Arendt, is highly temporalized. It is this retrospective and prospective imaginative movement that creates the little time-space *between* the two forces, and thus gives us the possibility of stepping out of the *stream* of time, so to speak, in order to reflect on the events and occurrences of the common world. It is in the very nature of thought-trains to bend, if not to break, the ordinary temporal sequence and thereby to create, as it were, a spatial dimension for moving within time. This is why Arendt believes that human beings as "beginnings" may have enough resources within themselves to understand without given categories.

No longer guided by the tradition, these temporal wanderings are by nature tentative. Thinking experiments with different ways of putting together the various threads originating from the three temporal strands, guided by preoccupations in the present, unwinding and exploring the threads of past, and anticipating, hoping, and planning the future. There is an ever-present possibility of finding still a better way of making connections—as well as an ever-present danger of getting tangled. It is therefore highly crucial to bear in mind that Arendt conceived the activity of thinking as a practice, *a set of exercises*. And as with all exercises, these are not meant to produce lasting results. They are, instead, based on the idea of experimenting in the hope of ever-more fruitful answers. In political theory this tentativeness is further heightened by the fact that it is intimately tied to the constantly moving realm of politics itself. The failure to draw this fact to its full conclusions—regrettably common in the secondary literature—results in an over-ontologization, atemporalization, and immobilization of her concepts. In other words, we too easily forget Arendt's self-analysis: "everything I did and everything I wrote—all that is tentative."³⁰

This shortcoming can partly be explained by the nature of writing as such. As Arendt pointed out, writing and thinking are not the same. In order to transform thinking into a tangible reality, one has to stop thinking, remember what one thought, and write it down. Thinking, in itself, hardly produces anything visible or stable, and even if it did, the thinker is compelled, like Penelope, to undo the results of her day's work every night. Writing, on the other hand, adds something relatively stable and permanent into the shared human artifice.³¹ Here, then, is the problem: how to give expression to one's thoughts without at the same time giving them too steady a form. How to

write without creating a metaphysical system, without betraying the inherent perpetual *movement* of thought? It is here that we need to consider matters of style and genre.

On the Essay as a Genre of Political Thought

I will suggest that the experiential tentativeness of Arendt's thought can be grasped more thoroughly if we direct our attention to the essayistic style of her theorizing. While many commentators have emphasized Arendt's narrative approach, or to use her own words, her "old-fashioned story-telling," I claim that Arendt's style is best understood in terms of essayism.³² Even though stories play a key role in her thinking, I concur with Buckler and Pitkin arguing that in terms of theory, story-telling is just one part of what Arendt does.³³ It would be more fruitful, I argue, to conceptualize her ethos as a thinker through the practice of writing essays, and conceive story-telling as one aspect of this practice. I will therefore shortly take issue with the narrative reading, but first I will examine the essayistic quality of Arendt's thought.

In Montaigne, Bacon, Hume, Emerson, and others, the essay is characterized as a literary form that marries experience with experimental writing. Furthermore, it is a platform that is anti-systematic and seeks linguistic clarity in a way that would make its subjects comprehensible also for the wider public.³⁴ In Arendt's time, Adorno and Lukács saw the essay as "the critical form par excellence."³⁵ For the former, the essay draws the fullest conclusions from the critique of systems by investing experience—which is never understood as mere individual experience—with as much substance as categories of thought are given in traditional theory.³⁶ As we can see, these themes accord with the features of Arendt's theorizing discussed above. Taking the essay into the focus, further, reveals a thick conceptual fabric in which the temporal, experience-centered, and experimental aspects of Arendt's thinking are woven together.³⁷

I refer to Arendt's essayism as an *ethos*. Rather than a clearly delineated method, essayism is a guiding attitude, a mode of response that shapes the style and practice of theorizing on a more general level. Whereas a method would imply certain strictly defined techniques, procedures, and guidelines for conducting inquiry, the essayistic *ethos* refers to a spirit which motivates the *praxis* of writing theory. Tightly interwoven with the new *ethos* of political thought discussed above, the key elements of this approach include experientialism and worldliness, experimentalism, temporal sensitivity, and pluralistic attunement. More specifically as a genre of writing, the essay implies a style that aims at communicability and seeks to make justice to the movement of thought, its non-finality.

That the essay is an important literary form for Arendt is revealed by even a superficial glance at her oeuvre. Most of her books are collections of essays, and I would even go as far as to claim that *The Human Condition* is in many ways better conceived as a collection of closely inter-related essays rather than as a systematic treatise of political theory. The explicit form of her writings, however, is only of secondary interest. My main argument is that even when the actual genre of writing seems more systematic, the *ethos* of Arendt's theorizing remained essayistic. Even though she rarely discussed matters of style, her understanding of thinking as an experience-based exercise, her usage of concepts, and the status she claimed to her texts is rather consistently essayistic.

Given the lack of attention from Arendt herself, it is not surprising that few commentators have paid attention to the stylistic elements in her theorizing.³⁸ But what she wrote about the essay in the preface to *Between Past and Future* could as well be generalized to all of her writings. Since the passage is of great importance to my argument, it is worth quoting at length. After explaining that the eight essays collected in the volume are exercises intended to gain experience in how to think, Arendt makes a short remark on their genre:

It seems to me, and I hope the reader will agree, that the essay as a literary form has a natural affinity to the exercises I have in mind. Like all collections of essays, this book of exercises obviously could contain more or fewer chapters without for that reason changing its character. Their unity—which to me is the justification of publishing them in book form—is not the unity of a whole but of a sequence of movements which, as in a musical suite, are written in the same or related keys. The sequence itself is determined by content.³⁹

Essayistic form thus naturally follows from what Arendt said about her exercises in thought. Both the essay and these exercises highlight the nature of political thinking as a movement, an activity. There are no final, unequivocal, results to be expected, as is the case in all exercises and practices. Arendt's conceptualization of thought follows her reading of the manner and *ethos* of Jaspers's philosophizing, his "playful metaphysics" in which certain thought processes are presented "in a way that is always experimental and never rigidly fixed, having at the same time the character of suggestions that induce others to join with him in thought."⁴⁰ No concept is intended as fixed. The question is whether the words disclose something about reality, and the reality is not only constantly changing but can be seen from a variety of perspectives. Hence, the search is never over; the task of the theorist is to test ideas, construct new analogies, and formulate new hypotheses along the changing political realities. Since they are no longer guided by traditional concepts and categories, these exercises are by nature tentative, open multiplicities. For the same reasons the

essay is also an anti-systematic form. Books, or oeuvres, consisting of essays could always contain more or less because the whole does not determine the content or the movement of the parts.

Consequently, Arendt's espousal of the essay can be understood in the wider context of her conceptualization of political thought as an experience-based exercise. It should not go unnoticed that there are strong etymological ties between the words *essay*, *experience*, and *experiment* (*assay*).⁴¹ These connections have partly survived to the present-day English as well. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, an essay, in the widest sense, is "an attempt to do something," "an endeavor"—thus an experiment, that is, both "a trial" and something "based on experience." The essay, thus, is *the* literary form for thinking understood as an exercise, as a constantly developing attempt to understand events and find out the effects of ideas, to draw tentative lessons from experience. It is a natural ally for "thinking without a bannister,"⁴² without pre-given categories. Given this, it should be clear that the experiments in the Arendtian sense are not the experiments of modern sciences, but rather imaginative endeavors in the realms of thought and writing.

The experimentalism of the essay is further revealed if we consider the close ties between it and poetry.⁴³ Thinking, Arendt argues, works with frozen metaphors. Metaphors are the only media through which the invisible "wind of thought" can be transformed into visible expressions. And metaphors are most intimately connected to poetry.⁴⁴ The essayistic ethos, like poetry, works through linguistic innovations, by crafting new metaphors and re-framing old ones. These two share a playful, imaginative approach to experience and language. The essayist, like the poet, plays with a multiplicity of thought-images arising from the past, the present, and the future. The Benjaminian gift of thinking poetically, which Arendt greatly admired, is another example of this affinity with Arendt's essayistic thinking and poetry. It consists of playing with thought-fragments and their novel, surprising combinations. Arendt's emphasis on imagination as the most important faculty for thinking is crucial in this context. For it is the very function of imagination to create distance to certain familiar issues, and to build bridges to others.⁴⁵ One way to read the essayistic-experimentalism in Arendt's thought would be to interpret it as a continuous trying out of these connections. As a playful literary form, the essay provides an apt platform for this kind of theorizing, in which serendipity plays a central role.

Another fundamental feature of the essay is its anti-systematic, because experience-based, nature, and the special temporal sensitivity that comes with it. In Arendt, this attack against all abstract systems often also took an openly anti-philosophic form. Writing of the two great essayists, Emerson and Montaigne, Arendt argued that "they are both humanist rather than philosophers, and that they therefore wrote essays rather than systems," further crediting Nietzsche's ("the black sheep among

the philosophers”) fondness of Emerson to this feature.⁴⁶ Here the question of experience, encountered in the previous section, comes up again. It can be argued that thought can fully digest the concrete experiences only if it is entirely freed from all systemic aspects and unnecessary abstractions.

Arendt’s essays, I argue, seek to make justice to the all-encompassing temporality, plurality, frailty, and “disconcerting contingency” of the world and human affairs.⁴⁷ It is for this very reason that they sometimes seem incoherent, fragmented, and contingent. The essay bears witness to the transient nature of the world.⁴⁸ This temporally sensitive nature is indeed what makes the essay particularly well suitable for *political* thought, given the elusive and animate nature of its subject matter. When launching, framing, and reframing her concepts, the essayist positions herself against the Platonic strand of reaching for the absolute and eternal, and the even more persistent tendency towards historical-explanatory and conceptual closures. The temporal and epistemological mediations that Arendt—according to Buckler⁴⁹—employs against these closures go hand in hand with her essayistic style. Here we also encounter the theme of communicability, so persistent in the essayistic tradition. According to Arendt, all critical thinking implies communicability.⁵⁰ Essayistic writing, especially political theory, needs to address the wider community and its political experiences.

Even though I think we should keep Arendt’s descriptions of thinking and writing to some extent apart from her more practical-political concepts, such as judgment and opinion, we can still argue that an essay can be conceived as a developed version of a *doxa*, a comprehension of the world as it opens itself to me (*dokei moi*), and the related discourse on judgment and criticism.⁵¹ Essayistic thought starts from a “first-order world disclosure,” from my position in—and viewpoint of—the already interpreted human world—in other words, experience. It then proceeds towards a deeper understanding of that world, as well as a disclosure of further dimensions of meanings, or possibilities of other kinds of worlds.⁵² Here the experiential, temporal, and experimental features of Arendt’s essays are nicely clinched together. It is, again, worth remembering that it is not subjective experience that we are dealing with here. It is the common, shared, and in this sense the same world that opens to everyone. One’s position in the world is the only thing that varies. And if, as Lukács argues, the essay resembles judgment, it does so in the Arendtian sense of enlarged mentality—a phronetic, anticipated communication with others.⁵³ Here the discussion on judgment illuminates certain further aspects of the essay: both start from a particular perspective, yet strive to focus on the essential features.⁵⁴ The essential feature in this phronesis is not the verdict (as would be the case with a system), but the process, the continuous *suspension* of the verdict.⁵⁵ A verdict would end the very *movement* of thinking to which the essay seeks to give a form.

As an essayist, Arendt was not interested in questions concerning the best form of government, duties of citizens towards their governments, and so on. For her, this traditional way of setting the agenda was too abstract and general. And with abstraction, as Buckler notes, comes temporal insensitivity.⁵⁶ Reality itself, Arendt pointed out, “never presents us with anything so neat as premises for logical conclusions.”⁵⁷ It is this non-concreteness and insensitivity to the through-going temporality that Arendt sought to uproot from political theorizing. What she strove for was a comprehensive temporalization of political theory, first, through radically exposing it to present experiences, and second, through the subsequent movement of thought between the past and the future. Essayistic political theory as she practiced it is sporadic, regional, and tentative. The essayist does not work with concepts as though they were mathematical functions, clearly delineated and safely insulated from experience. Instead, the idea of essayism is that concepts are always “mere” thought experiments that can be further developed or approached from a different angle in a later essay. The essay is a literary platform for trying out new ideas and enhancing them, thereby developing further our preliminary understanding of the worldly events. Following Arendt’s musical metaphor above, we could argue that the essayist’s concepts are like musical themes—recognizable as having the same root, but often differently actualized. Trying to find the one, logically consistent meaning for any given concept in this context is as absurd as arguing that there is only one true manifestation for a musical theme.

Now, putting the essay into the center of Arendt’s oeuvre in this manner calls us to reframe some influential interpretations of her thought, such as the narrative reading advocated by, among others, Disch and Benhabib.⁵⁸ To be clear, stories and story-telling play a key role in Arendt’s thought, and are intimately intertwined with the experiential nature of her theorizing. Intermingled stories of experience are a crucial aspect of essayistic political theory. She once described her approach as “old-fashioned story-telling,” denoting that “no matter how abstract our theories may sound . . . there are incidents and stories behind them which . . . contain in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say.”⁵⁹ Events need to be turned into stories in order to give meaning to them. A few things need to be noted here, however. For instance, Arendt never used the word “narrative” herself, and the usage of the word “story” here refers more to the content than to the way the story is told. Or, to put it in another way: it refers to the experiential basis of thought rather than to the structure or method of theorizing. Consequently, speaking of a narrative structure of theorizing runs the risk of muddling the waters rather than clearing them, especially given the recent “narrative turn” in social sciences.⁶⁰ Arendt’s “method” is not *defined* by story-telling. As other commentators, such as Hanna Pitkin and Steve Buckler have also argued, stories are just one part in her theoretical repertoire.⁶¹ While it is an important part, I claim, it is only one feature of her thought. She also

employs conceptual analysis, making distinctions, and so on. What is definitive, instead, is the essayistic ethos, combined with a sense of critical responsiveness to the political crises in the present and the temporal movement between the past and the future.

I will try to further concretize these features below by taking up Arendt's concept of "the social" and by illuminating its experiential basis, tentative nature, and temporal structure. By doing this, I hope to demonstrate how my reading of Arendt's theorizing will help to increase the usability of her concepts as well as to bypass certain aporias associated with them. The social, as the most debated Arendtian concept, provides a fruitful example. I will argue that there is no point in trying to discern and articulate a single, coherent concept of the social. What Arendt referred to as "the social," or "society" was an idea she experimented with throughout her writings, starting from her early discussion on parvenu and pariah, through analyses of minorities and nationalism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, all the way to the better known examples of mass-society and Kafkaesque bureaucracy in *The Human Condition* and the later writings. What is crucial from our point of view is that these different tentative articulations of the idea do not constitute a coherent body but refer to various related but separate trajectories and phenomena. Consequently, we should drop the question of whether or not to accept Arendt's analysis of the social as such or as an artificially integrated version. Instead, we should try to do exactly what Arendt herself did in relation to the history of political thought. That is, we should approach this, or any other Arendtian concept, as pearl divers, eclectically.⁶²

"The Social" and the Temporal Movement of Thought

As said, among Arendt's concepts the social is without a doubt the most controversial. The concept marks a hybrid space that has emerged between the private and public sides of life, eventually taking more and more space from them, turning household issues such as preservation of life and fostering the individual and species life process into public concerns and simultaneously diminishing the space available for purely political activities.⁶³ None of the commentators has found the concept entirely appealing, and many have pointed out that there are various meanings given to the term throughout Arendt's oeuvre.⁶⁴ Both observations are correct, but inadequate. If we take the description of political theory presented in the preceding section seriously, we are able to treat the social as a tentative, experimental concept that lacks finality and unity. If it was that Arendt was always talking of the same phenomena, and trying to formulate a unified concept, it would be quite reasonable to conclude that she did not succeed, and indeed tried to do too many things with the

same concept. The variety of phenomena she placed under the conceptual roof of the social is, after all, quite overwhelming. These include, and the list is not exclusive, the rise of mass society, the universalization of the tastes and manners of the “high society,” the rise of modern bureaucracy and “national housekeeping,” worldlessness, and the victory of *animal laborans* from other ways of understanding human existence.

I believe it is quite fair to conclude that there is at best family resemblances between the different uses of the concept. We get most of this conceptual plurality, I claim, when we take the social as what it is, that is, a thought experiment, a tool that does its job if it discloses something about the political reality to which we apply it. I will demonstrate this by discussing some influential interpretations of the concept along with the worldly basis from which Arendt’s thinking springs. Many interpretations would benefit from a closer look at its usage in specific contexts, instead of trying to parse a systematical account of it. For instance, Pitkin’s laudable book-length study of the subject seems to be committed to a master narrative according to which a single, albeit inconsistent, concept is developing from Arendt’s early writings all the way to the last ones. I would argue, on the contrary, that when the addressed problematic changes, the concept changes. This viewpoint also eases a further problem—namely, the fact that, in Pitkin’s words, “Arendt writes about the social as if an evil monster from outer space, entirely external to and separate from us, had fallen upon us intent on debilitating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us, gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serve its purposes.”⁶⁵

But these are the kind of problems that arise, I claim, if we omit the essayistic, experience-based nature of Arendt’s exercises in thought, and fail to pay attention to what she actually did with her concepts in different contexts. From the perspective of this article, we need to reconsider Pitkin’s complaints regarding Arendt’s reluctance to define her terms, or providing “quasi-definitions.”⁶⁶ My point is not that we should avoid defining our concepts altogether. However, dunning for strict definitions runs against the ethos of Arendt’s theorizing, whose strength lies exactly in its non-formality: in its experimental nature and in its closeness to the political practice and adjustability in the face of new experiences. Concepts, in antisystematic theorizing, are introduced unceremoniously, as Adorno says,⁶⁷ and their meanings derive from their relations to each other. With each definition we face the risk of laying down something static and immobile, something alien both for the political world and the process of thinking. Instead of a clearly demarcated concept, we might benefit from approaching the social as a problematization, that is, “the development of a domain of acts, practices, and thoughts that seem . . . to pose problems for politics.”⁶⁸

As Patricia Owens has recently argued, against the tide of the existing secondary literature, “when properly read alongside comparable historical and theoretical work, [the social] can be defended as a powerful analysis of the political consequences of industrial capitalism and supporting ideologies.”⁶⁹ Bringing forth the essayistic ethos developed in this article could be helpful here. The concept may thus be approached as an experience-laden, tentative argument, rather than as a part of a system. It is a result of critical historical inquiry, and is intended as a support for further inquiry. The concept, furthermore, has strong temporal underpinnings. It starts from a crisis or problem faced in the present (e.g., the shrinking space for proper politics in the modern nation-state, normalization of behavior, or the situation of stateless people). The critical conception of the present is then broadened and substantiated by an inquiry into the historical formation and trajectories of the elements of present experience, as well as into different practices and past experiences that can be used as reference points for comparison, critique, and disclosure of novel horizons of meaning. It is in this light that I think we should read Owen’s argument that the social is “fundamentally historical.”⁷⁰ More specifically, it is historical in a genealogical manner. It is written from the point of view of the present and is inherently political. It is not a historical analysis but a *political analysis* “in terms of history.”⁷¹ Further, it focuses on specific practices, concrete historical situations, experiences, and belief systems rather than on general processes. It pays attention to the disjointed emergence of phenomena from a multiplicity of practices instead of trying to find a single essential feature in each of them. The point is to write critical histories in the sense of inquiring into the *conditions of possibility* of a problematic practice, prejudice, or way of conduct—to ask about the actual conditions that constitute the basis for various misconceptions.⁷²

The ultimate aim of the usage of the past in Arendt’s theorizing is the questioning of the prevailing order of things, “depriving the present of its peace of mind.”⁷³ In Nietzschean terms, then, the role of the past is to enable a degree of untimeliness apropos of the present, looking afresh at our own time.⁷⁴ This is the greatest benefit the end of tradition can possibly provide: as the meaning of the past for the present is no longer “given” through a continuous narrative, the field opens for making radically new connections, forming new juxtapositions, generating force-fields between experiences, ideas, and phenomena formerly conceived as discrete. The objective is to find illuminative contrasts, possibilities for being, and exemplary actions and principles.

In the case of the various usages of the social, this approach to the past can be seen, for example, in Arendt’s analysis of statelessness in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and various other writings. Starting from the situation of the stateless in the mid-twentieth century, Arendt delved into history, analyzing the minority treaties, the French revolution, and the emergence of the bourgeoisie society and the modern capitalist nation-state in the nineteenth century. These reflections gave Arendt for

the first time all the elements she would later analyze under the concept of the social. The simultaneous development of nationalism and modern capitalism led to a twofold degradation of citizenship. On the one hand, the publicly minded citizen was transformed into a person who judges everything by the yardstick of his private interest of consumption.⁷⁵ On the other, the citizen was now equated to the national. Whereas the former led to a process whereby a proper political publicity has become nearly impossible,⁷⁶ the latter introduced a principle of exclusion more severe than anything seen before and re-introduced the absolute to the political realm, this time in the form of general will of the people instead of the will of God or the will of the monarch.⁷⁷ These analyses also gave Arendt the chance to confirm empirically her suspicions that the Heideggerian *das Man* has to be historicized.⁷⁸

By articulating these experiential, worldly bases from which Arendt derived her conception of the social, the concept ceases to seem like some inhuman force, some kind of science fiction “blob,” as Hanna Pitkin puts it. By contrast, its analytical force increases once we are able to see it more as a tentative concept that calls for further experimentation instead of a take-it-or-leave-it kind of criticism. Once we drop the unfortunate habit of giving Arendt’s distinctions and concepts the kind of finality she never intended them to have, the interpretative horizon available to us expands significantly, giving us more space to move and thus making the utilization of Arendtian resources more dynamic in the contemporary conditions.

Furthermore, paying the required attention to these historical analyses shows that the social is not a “thing,” as in Pitkin’s critical interpretation, but a historical, emergent phenomenon, or rather a set of practices and mentalities, actualizing in different ways in different contexts. It bears some resemblance to the Foucauldian analyses of governmentality and biopolitics.⁷⁹ This does not, of course, mean that it is all correct and useful. It does, however, give us the opportunity to judge the value of the concept case by case, in context. Once the social is considered a conceptual roof for a multiplicity of issues, bearing only family resemblances to each other, we are freed from the need to provide a universal judgment on its usefulness. It also helps us to dodge such questions as “who is to blame?” or “who has the power?”⁸⁰ If, as I suggested, the social is comparable to the abovementioned Foucauldian concepts, it can be approached as a discursive practice, centered on the functioning and effects of power rather than on its location.

Essaying Experience—Towards a Conclusion

This article has carried out a re-reading of Hannah Arendt's political theorizing. I have been arguing that her thought is best understood as an essayistic practice: an open-ended, tentative, and flexible set of exercises. By paying due attention to the style of her theorizing we are better able to draw the full conclusions from the fact that her thinking takes its fundamental bearings from the concrete experiences, the happenings of the political world. Her ability to avoid abstraction is, we might argue, what gives her the ability to integrate the fact of human plurality, that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world,"⁸¹ into the center of her political theory. This pluralistic, experimental, and essayistic theorizing continues to be a persistent challenge and—above all—a plausible model for political thought in the contemporary context.

The most consequential feature of essayistic theorizing as practiced by Arendt is the obstinate resistance to the temptation of "going abstract," of emancipating oneself from experience. While it is not unheard of for theorists to take their fundamental bearings from the political crises of their own time, there is still something unique in Arendt's essayistic experientialism. As Buckler argues, many theorists who claim to think beyond the abstract tradition, in the final analysis, resort to a "distinctively philosophical questioning."⁸² Arendt particularly stands apart from the current trend in which the principles of politics are brought back to more fundamental ontological principles.⁸³ This happens for instance in Jean-Luc Nancy's thought, which—as Adriana Cavarero has argued—disregards the local and temporal dimension of politics, thus flattening politics into ontology.⁸⁴ This also happens when ontology is used as a normative foundation from which politics can be derived—an operation at work, for instance, in the early works of John Rawls (as well as many preceding liberals). Arendt's attempt to approach ontological questions in a non-dogmatic, non-definitive manner poses a challenge to any theory seeking to establish too adjacent relations between ontology and politics. This relation is for her, at best, inspirational.

This inspirational relationship is the key for coming into terms with the fact that Arendt herself sometimes sounds like she is laying down an uncontestable ontology—of human plurality, action, and so forth. And indeed, Arendt presents us with an ontology of the fundamental conditions of human life. Most importantly, she states an ontological "fact" of human plurality. The ontological statement, however, should be understood in the light of the essayistic ethos explicated in the present article. The point is emphatically *not* to base politics upon metaphysical Ontology, a theory of being. It is, rather, to provide a starting point for reflection on politics—a starting point that does

justice to the peculiarities of this activity. Arendt's ontology of plurality and action has its roots in her reading of the political experiences of the past and not in speculative argumentation. Essayistic thinking builds its ontological assumptions on past and present experiences and proceeds to interpret the political events of the day from this self-reflective starting point. Politics, and the experience thereof, always comes first.

This is also to be kept in mind when faced with criticisms of Arendt's "phenomenological essentialism" (Benhabib)⁸⁵ and the unwarranted sharpness of her distinctions. Arendt herself seemed to be aware that her wordings may sometimes sound more dogmatic than they are meant to be. But sometimes, perhaps, the power of her essayistic thought can be felt *because* of this sharpness. This requires a further, *sharp*, distinction on the part of the reader: that between heuristic value of tentative concepts derived from experience, and heavily Ontological terminology. All this, of course, is also not to say that we should disregard all problems and contradictions in Arendt's thought. Once we get the interpretative apparatus to its place, the real, *political*, criticism can begin.

Notes

1. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), xxiii.
2. Dana Villa, "Introduction: The Development of Arendt's Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. D. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.
3. Hanna Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4.
4. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, 139, 193, 195.
5. Steve Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory. Challenging the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 2. See also Richard Bernstein, "Arendt on Thinking," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 277.
6. E.g., Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*; and Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 116
7. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004 [1840]), 876. See also Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (Hereafter, *PP*) (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 38.
8. Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Hereafter, *BPF*) (New York: Penguin, 2006 [1961]), 26.
9. Arendt, *PP*, 55.

10. Ibid., 38, 55.
11. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Hereafter, *EU*) (New York: Schocken Books, 2005 [1994]), 321.
12. Arendt, “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. M. A. Hill (New York: St. Martin’s, 1979), 336.
13. Arendt, *BPF*, 14.
14. Arendt, “Hannah Arendt,” 308. See also Arendt, *EU*, 20.
15. Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” *The Journal of Politics* 20, no. 1 (1958): 8.
16. Arendt, “Thinking,” *The Life of the Mind* (Hereafter, *LOM*) (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 78, 166. Arendt, *EU*, 20.
17. Arendt, “Thinking,” *LOM*, 201.
18. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt*, 6, 8–9, *passim.*; Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 6–15; Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 6, 29, 39, *passim.*
19. Pitkin, *The Attack*, 36.
20. Arendt to McCarthy, May 28 1971, *Between Friends. The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995).
21. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 797.
22. Arendt, *EU*, 310–11. See also Rolando Vázquez, “Thinking the Event with Hannah Arendt,” *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9 no. 1 (2006): 45.
23. Arendt, “Thinking,” *LOM*, 78; Arendt, “Willing,” *LOM*, 37.
24. E.g., Scott, “The Evidence,” and Richard Rorty, “Dewey’s Metaphysics,” *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
25. Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 62–64. However, Arendt herself sometimes used the expression “personal experience” in reference to thinking (E.g. Arendt, *EU*, 20).
26. See Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. J. Kohn and Ron Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 274–84; and Tuija Parvikko, *The Responsibility of the Pariah. The Impact of Bernard Lazare on Arendt’s Conception of Political Action and Judgment in Extreme Situations* (SoPhi: Jyväskylä, 1996).
27. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Hereafter, *MDT*) (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2001 [1968]), 5, 7–8.
28. For the Greeks, both *theoros* (theorist) and *theoria* (theory) implied that theory- as-an-activity is distinguishable from its result, *theoremata*. Michael Oakeshott, “What Is Political Theory?” in *What Is History? And Other Essays*, ed. Luke O’Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 391–92. The origins of *theoria* in the Greek tragedies further displays the close ties between theorizing, understanding, thinking, and judging.
29. Arendt, *BPF*, 10; “Thinking,” *LOM*, 202–10.

30. Arendt, "Hannah Arendt," 338.
31. Arendt, *HC*, 76, 90.
32. On narratives, see Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, and Lisa Disch, "More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (1993).
33. Pitkin, *The Attack*, 277–78; Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 38.
34. See, e.g., Christina Kirklighter, *Transgressing the Democratic Borders of the Essay* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).
35. Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as a Form," *Notes to Literature, Volume 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 18; György Lukács, *Soul & Form*, ed. John Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 17.
36. Adorno, "The Essay," 9–10.
37. E.g., Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt*; Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*.
38. The only explicit discussion of Arendt's style occurs in Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 52–55. The essay, alas, is not mentioned.
39. Arendt, *BPF*, 14–15.
40. Arendt, *EU*, 183.
41. See Heikki Kovalainen, *Self as World: The New Emerson* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2010), 19–21, 240.
42. Arendt, "Hannah Arendt," 336.
43. See also Adorno, "The Essay," 3; Lukacs, *Soul & Form*, 29.
44. Arendt, "Thinking," *LOM*, 104–10. See also Bernstein, "Arendt on thinking," 279, 286–87; Maria Pía Lara, "Reflective Judgment as World Disclosure," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 43, no. 1–2 (2008): 89–90.
45. Arendt, *EU*, 323.
46. Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 283.
47. Arendt, *HC*, 191; Arendt, *MDT*, 12.
48. See also Adorno, "The Essay," 10–11.
49. Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 8.
50. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40.
51. On *doxa* and *dokei moi*, see Arendt, *PP*, 14.
52. The concept of "first-order world disclosure" is from Nikolas Kompridis, "On World Disclosure: Heidegger, Habermas, and Dewey," *Thesis Eleven* 37, no. 1 (1994).

53. Arendt, *BPF*, 217–19. It should be noted, nevertheless, that judging—like thinking and unlike writing—remains a purely mental activity.
54. See Richard Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), ix.
55. See also Lukacs, *Soul & Form*, 34.
56. Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 8.
57. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1972), 12.
58. Disch, “More Truth Than Fact”; Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, 91–95.
59. Arendt, “Action and Pursuit for Happiness,” Lecture delivered at the American Political Science Association, 1950 (Library of Congress, MSS Box 61, 1.1960), 1, 11; Arendt, *MDT*, 97.
60. On the “narrative turn,” see, e.g., Lynda L. Harling Stalker, “A Tale of Two Narratives: Ontological and Epistemological Narratives,” *Narrative Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (2009): 221.
61. Pitkin, *The Attack*, 277–78; Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 38.
62. Arendt, *MDT*, 205–6.
63. See Arendt, *HC*, 5, 46, 128, *passim*.
64. See Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt*, 17; Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, 23–28; Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 117–20.
65. Pitkin, *The Attack*, 4.
66. *Ibid.*, 10, 13.
67. Adorno, “The Essay,” 12.
68. Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, Problematizations,” *Ethics: The Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 114.
69. Patricia Owens, “Human Security and the Rise of the Social,” *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 558.
70. Patricia Owens, “Not Life but the World Is at Stake: Hannah Arendt on Citizenship in the Age of the Social,” *Citizenship Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 298.
71. Arendt, *EU*, 403.
72. Arendt, *PP*, 49.
73. Arendt, *MDT*, 193.
74. Even though Arendt’s approach to past was influenced by Nietzsche’s, their similarities are limited. For her, Nietzsche—like Marx and Kierkegaard—was still “held by the categorical framework of the great tradition” (Arendt, *BPF*, 28).
75. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973 [1951]), 336.
76. Arendt, *BPF*, 208.
77. Arendt, *EU*, 208–9; Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin 2006 [1962]), 182, 186–87.

78. Pitkin, *The Attack*, 50.
79. See Owens, "Human Security"; Kathrin Braun, "Biopolitics and Temporality in Arendt and Foucault," *Time & Society* 16, no. 1 (2007). As with Nietzsche, the similarities with Foucauldian genealogy are strictly regional, pertaining to the critical use of the past.
80. Pitkin, *The Attack*, 33, 62.
81. Arendt, *HC*, 7.
82. Buckler, *Hannah Arendt*, 168.
83. While they differ on their understanding of politics, Jacques Rancière comes quite close to Arendt on this matter. He argues that the requirement to trace politics back to ontological principles leads either "to the dissolution of politics on behalf of some historico-ontological destinary process" or to seeing political wrongs "as the consequence of an original wrong, so that only a God or an onto- logical revolution can save us." Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics," *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, ed. Paul Bowman (London: Continuum, 2011), 12. For a more philosophy of science oriented critique of heavy ontology in political science, see Juha Kämpylä and Harri Mikkola, "'Getting Things Right?' A Reconsideration of Critical Realism as a Metatheory for IR," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14, no. 4 (2011).
84. Adriana Cavarero, "Politicizing Theory," *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002): 515–16. In continental thinking, the same more or less self-declared tendency also characterizes the philosophies of Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou. See, e.g., Claire Blencowe, "Foucault's and Arendt's 'Insider View' of Biopolitics: A Critique of Agamben," *History of the Human Sciences* 23, no. 5 (2010) who criticizes Agamben for turning Arendt's arguments into abstract and de-histori- cized versions. Among Anglophone philosophers one could, following Stephen K. White's *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), name Alasdair McIntyre (7) and the (early) John Rawls (18–20).
85. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism*, 123.