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Author(s): Hyvönen, Ari-Elmeri

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The Janus-Face of Political Experience

Abstract

Arendt's concept of experience can contribute in important ways to the contemporary debates in political and feminist theory. However, while the notion is ubiquitous in Arendt's thinking we lack an understanding of experience as a concept, as opposed to the impact of Arendt's personal experiences on her thought. Drawing from her notes for "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century", the article seeks to enrich our understanding of the Janus-faced character of political experience. It emphasizes the importance of vicariousness, and argues that experience should be understood as a process of suffering, enduring, and re-experiencing events beyond our conscious control. The article further posits that experience appear only when events, through metaphors, are allowed to leave their mark on our way of using language. It is argued that this concept poses an important challenge to the different ways experience is approached in contemporary political and feminist theory.

Keywords: *experience, suffering, tragedy, imagination, event*

Author

Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

arhyvone@jyu.fi

+358 505 690 861

Address (home):

Pohjankulma 6 B 23,

33500 Tampere,

Finland

Address (work):

Department of Social Sciences and

Philosophy,

40014 University of Jyväskylä

The Janus-Face of Political Experience

As we know from her own statements and a broad array of scholarly works, experience is a central category in Hannah Arendt's political theory. In an oft-quoted declaration, she urged political theorists to "think through experience". "What is the subject of our thought?", she asked and answered, "Experience! Nothing else!" (Arendt 1979, 308). Thinking must therefore remain bound to events and experience "as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings" (Arendt 2006a, 14). As experience-centricity is one of the most recognized features of her thought, one would expect to find a considerable amount of studies discussing Arendt's concept of experience; differences from other possible ways of conceiving the notion, and its potential contributions political theory more broadly. This, however, is not exactly the case. Most scholars have focused on the impact of the events of twentieth century, and Arendt's *personal* experiences thereof, on her thinking (e.g. Pitkin 1998, 36; Bernstein 1996, 6; Popp 2015)¹. While these studies have increased our understanding of her thought, they reveal little about Arendt's *concept* of experience and its potential contribution to debates in political theory. In response to this predicament, this article seeks to explicate Arendt's unique notion of experience and its considerable promise. I pose to Arendt the same question she concluded her commentary of Heidegger's essay on phenomenology and theology with: "What is experience, really, and its Janus face?" (Arendt and Heidegger 2004, 174). Additionally, I argue that Arendt's vision of experience-centered political theory, by refusing the dominant ways of conceiving experience, offers a productive challenge to the recent debates in political and feminist theory.

In order to understand the nature of Arendt's contribution, a glance into the trajectory of the political theory of experience is needed. The nature of political experience has generally been seen from several opposing perspectives. First, since Hume and Burke, "experience" has denoted the accumulated, steady and objective wisdom of the past as a guide to present politics. Second, experience has been understood as a form of pre-conceptual immediacy, often something to be strived for as an end in itself. In this sense, experience is subjective, something an individual can "have". Third, experience can also be seen as a way of (passively) receiving information from the world. In feminist theory, critical race studies, and beyond, personal experience was for a long time – at least until the 1980s – construed as a starting point for analysis, a ground for knowledge-claims. Then, with the advent of the linguistic turn, experience arguably suffered a near-mortal blow. Over the last few decades there has been a persistent debate over the value and plausibility of experience as such.

In contemporary political and feminist theory among other fields, experience is best described as a "suspect concept" (Janack 2012, 4; Kruks 2001, 131). This owes much to Joan Scott's paradigmatic essay, in which she critiques the use of subjective experience as "uncontestable evidence" in knowledge-claims. The appeal to experience, Scott contests, usually implies taking for granted the ahistorical categories that organize it, assuming that facts "speak for themselves" and that meaning is transparent (Scott 1991, 777–779). She proposes we treat experience as a discursive construction, nothing more. Similar tendencies also emerge from other corners of political theory. Richard Rorty, for one, suggests dropping the notion of experience in favor of linguistic analysis (Rorty 1982, 72–89). Further, while it might not do justice to the complexities of their views, the *impact* of such philosophers as Derrida, Agamben and Nancy pulls away from

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experience in favor of textual and/or ontological reflections. To some extent, this can be explained by the belief that experience “is no longer accessible to us” (Agamben 2007, 15). This assessment, however, presupposes the view of experience as something that could be passed on from one generation to another.

Within feminist political theory, Scott’s position has remained centripetal even among critics. Authors drawing from the phenomenological tradition have criticized her linguisticism and defended a non-cognitive, embodied and sentient version of experience that cannot be put into words (Alcoff 2000, 39; Kruks 2001, 13–14, 133, *passim.*). Others have argued that phenomenological critics are in danger of treating experience as an irreducible given and sought other channels of defending experience. Drawing from Foucault, Johanna Oksala has recently suggested that we should accept Scott’s argument regarding the linguistic construction of subjective experience, whilst also paying attention to the fractures within experience itself and embrace the promise of *others’* experiences as a way of distancing ourselves from our own subjective positions (Oksala 2016, 37–39, 46, 55–67). Elsewhere, F.R. Ankersmit has instead defended a version of historical experience divorced from language (Ankersmit 2005).

It is possible to draw two observations from these debates. First, at least to an extent, the defenses of experience have remained discrete voices in political theory more broadly. Such tendencies as the focus on discursive analysis and the “ontological turn” tend to turn our focus elsewhere. Second, despite their disagreements, these theorists of experience share much in common. Their focus is on personal experiences of individual subjects, and they tend to link, in one way or another, experience to knowledge-claims.

Looking at Arendt from the perspective of these debates, she is sometimes viewed as harboring a phenomenological notion of experience comparable to the option presented by Kruks and Alcott (Borren 2013, 227, 232–233; van der Walt 2012, 66). Given the emphasis in the literature on personal experiences, we might also assume she fits in the camp of those defending the epistemic value of personal experience in political theory. With her emphasis on the value of historical experiences it may seem that she is a proponent of the “experience as accumulated wisdom” view. Furthermore, together with likes of Jünger, Arendt is sometimes listed as a supporter of the position in which political action becomes a valuable subjective experience to be achieved (e.g Jay 2005, 176).

None of these descriptions are completely satisfactory. As Markell has argued with reference to revolutionary experiences, the meaning of action is not transparent to the actors themselves, nor can it serve the familiar purpose of “lessons” from the past (Markell 2010, 97–99). Unless rigorously qualified, the comparisons to phenomenology also reveal little about the “idiosyncratic way Arendt uses the fraught idea of ‘experience’” (Markell 2010, 95–96). After all, no other phenomenologist placed as much emphasis on worldly political experience as opposed to its subjective qualities. Phenomenologists tend to focus on inter-subjective interaction with others and practical dealings with things, which does not quite do justice to the specificities of political experience. Finally, against the defenders of personal experience, I suggest Arendt’s contribution resides in the explication of a worldly, non-epistemic notion of experience². While “the subject” is central to the views of Scott, Alcott, Ankersmit, Oksala, and Kruks, with Arendt

we should inquire the limits of this view, and consider the strengths of a world-centric notion of experience.

In Arendt's published works, we only find a scant description of what she means by experience. Instead, she discusses it as if the meaning was obvious, and ignores the long and complex history of the word³. Therefore, in order to reconstruct a fuller account of her use of 'experience', I suggest we should also examine her notes for "Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century"⁴, a course Arendt taught first at Cornell University (Arendt 1965; henceforth cited as PEC) and later at the New School for Social Research (Arendt 1968a; henceforth cited as PEN). An earlier incarnation of the course was organized in the form of an undergraduate seminar at the University of California at Berkeley with the title "Contemporary Issues" in 1955 (Arendt 1955).⁵ Using these lectures as an entry point, I follow Arendt's suggestion of the Janus-faced nature of experience. Much like the two-faced Roman god, it brings together elements that pull in different directions. Most importantly, we cannot understand experience in Arendt without examining the to-and-fro between the invisible and the visible, and between experience and *re-experience*. With this in mind, I suggest that vicariousness and indirectness play a larger role in Arendt's concept of experience than is usually acknowledged.

While I do not aim for conceptual closure, I suggest that experience in Arendt's case can be understood as a process of *enduring and re-experiencing events we cannot control*, a process that properly appears in its particularity only when it is allowed to change the ways we use language. Experience, in fact, can only make its appearance as metaphorically expressed re-experiencing of events. Thinking circles around experience, but experience comes to us belatedly and poetically,

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not directly and transparently. It is for these same reasons, I suggest, that Arendt's concept of experience, once properly reconstructed, could have unsettling and provocative impact in the debates on the role of experience in political theory more broadly. If, as Ankersmit (2005, 1, 7) indicates, we are witnessing a return to experience then Arendt's voice is not to be ignored.

1 Political experience and events

The first session at Cornell started with an explanation from Arendt that she intended the course to deal with experience "in the literal sense". She explains: "we look upon it from the viewpoint of the man upon whom the events were raining as it were and who re-acted" (PEC)⁶. She wants to recapture experiences, not of those who were "in politics", who made history and are responsible, but those who were the "sufferers" – that is to say, those who were not in charge (PEN). From the outset, it is far from clear what makes such approach to experience "literal". I investigate her statement by discussing, first, the relation of events to experience, and second, the notion of sufferers and what it can reveal about the nature of experience.

The empirical referent, so to speak, of political experience is linked primarily to events. Like Janus – the god of transitions – experience relates to beginnings. In her early work "Concern for Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought", the experiential background of thinking is identified with "the sheer horror of contemporary political events" (Arendt 1994, 444–445). They register a "shock of reality", the emergence of an "unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities", an "inexhaustible literalness" of new realities that have

actualized (Arendt 1994, 320). Deeds, sufferings, and possibilities are of course the very stuff of political experience. Events, therefore, disclose a new field of experience.

This does not mean however, that Arendt would reduce politics proper to the grandiose extraordinary events – a reading sometimes entertained either approvingly or disapprovingly. Whenever she emphasized the importance of events in her writings, it was not against “the common and the ordinary”. Rather, in her writing events are set in opposition to the modern conception of history as a singular process consisting of ‘social forces and historical trends’, ‘tendencies’ or ‘functional apparatuses’ as most clearly expressed in philosophies of history from Smith to Kant to Hegel (PEN; Arendt 2006a, 62–63). In order to do justice to experience, she maintains that political thought needs to direct its questioning and wondering impulse towards the world of human affairs instead of analyzing invisible trends that “work behind the back of those who act” (PEN; EU, 445).

Common sense, rather than scientific knowledge or theoretical reason, is the Ariadne thread of understanding that gives us a preliminary view of events and their significance. It is indeed our very organ for perceiving reality (Arendt 1972, 110). Popular language, Arendt argues in “Understanding and Politics”, informs us that an event has taken place simply by coining a new word – Arendt’s example is totalitarianism, but we could equally talk about, say, “post-truth politics”. While these new words necessarily become clichés and catchwords, they contain the “original intuition” that is the guide of all understanding, the process of reconciling ourselves with the world. Both common sense and scientific analysis, however, easily lose sight of this novelty, in fact immediately “denying that we saw anything new at all” and resorting to historical

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analogies (EU, 311-312, 320, 325n8). Instead, what is needed is a decisive focus on the new and bringing forth its consequences for the world in the present.

The central role of events reveals a distinctive feature of Arendt's concept of experience. The unexpectedness of the events, their ability to interrupt historical processes, sets Arendt apart from the view of experience as an accumulation of past wisdom. The role of events and common sense also separate Arendt from those authors who focus on the subjective quality of experiences. While she is interested in the sufferers of the events, as I will explicate below, it is nevertheless the case that the event directs our attention to the common world, not subjective experience per se. Common sense, which is vital to the understanding of experience, always presupposes that we share the world with others. Events make, remake, and in many ways, define this common world.

2 Suffering, vicariousness, and experience

As previously mentioned, in "Political Experiences" Arendt is interested in the "sufferers" of history, not the "makers" of it. It is here that some of the more surprising elements of Arendt's concept of experience start to emerge. However, the notion of "makers of history" ought not to be confused with the "men of action", whose perspectives are present in the course with such authors as Malraux, Jünger, Hemingway, Heller⁷, and others. In fact, the emphasis on the sufferers needs to be understood from two complementary perspectives. First, it covertly refers to the division of humankind – mentioned in the Preface to *The Origins* – "into believers of omnipotence and those whose major experience is powerlessness", to the experience of

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powerlessness in the face of totalitarianism and political reactions to it (Arendt 1973, vii). Arendt's, however, is not an exercise in victimology, the act of telling the story from the viewpoint of the victims and their identity (c.f. Laruelle 2015), as such an approach would result in apologetics (Arendt 1994, 402–403). Second, there is a more general point that leads us to the nature of political experience as such. As previously mentioned, there is a rather widespread reading of Arendt as the most elaborate defender of the value of political experience for its own sake (e.g. Jay 2005, 176). This 'activist' interpretation, nonetheless, is grossly over-simplified. It undoes the tragic and non-sovereign character of action. These two points come together when we consider, for example, the members of the French Resistance, who refused to become victims of the events: they were able to react and respond. In other words, Arendt is interested in those sufferers who refuse to passively accept the events that rain on them – who *re-act* and thus *inadvertently* open a new field of experience for themselves. If experience *in general* is something like the process of familiarizing oneself with the world, political experience specifically seems to indicate a process of going-through something that one cannot fully control. The actors Arendt concerns herself with in the "Political Experiences" did not engage in politics in order to achieve some pre-conceived form of experience.

Arendt's emphasis throughout her works on the experience of "greatness" should be read from this perspective. Indeed, she holds that greatness is not limited to the doers of great deeds, but *equally* belongs to the "endurer and the sufferer" (Arendt 2007, 948). This view is not a simple concession to potential critics – on the contrary, it contains essential clues to the nature of political experience, to the fact that action and suffering are closely related. For John Dewey, one of the foremost philosophers of experience in the twentieth century, their connection "*forms* what

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we call experience” (Dewey 1957, 86). While Arendt differs from Dewey's first-person based, knowing-and-learning oriented approach, there is a common ground between the two. One is always, as Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*, the actor and the sufferer of one's own life-story, but emphatically *not* its victim or author (Arendt 1998, 184). This is true for the actor as much it is for those who suffer the consequences of others' actions. As Arendt explains:

“Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings” (Arendt 1998, 190).

By making the connection to suffering, Arendt is following along the etymological roots of the word experience. The English word derives from the Latin *experientia*, meaning trial, proof, or experiment. As Jay explains, *expereri* (to try) contains the same root as *periculum* (peril or danger), showing a link to having survived danger, or even suggesting a “worldliness that has left innocence behind”. Furthermore, while etymologically not related, the Greek *pathos* “in the sense of what one suffers or endures” also seems to be linked to some of the meanings – Arendt's included – given to ‘experience’ in modern times (Jay 2005, 10–11). It is perhaps telling that there are several entries in *Denktagebuch*, in which Arendt explores the links between *pathos*, endurance, suffering, action, thought, and catharsis (e.g. Arendt 2003, 525–526). Arendt's concept of experience arguably encloses both the passive sense implied by *pathos* and the more active one suggested by *experientia*. Experience relates to interaction with the world that can

only be endured, not commanded; yet, by re-experiencing, thinking, and analyzing it, as I will argue, we can proactively engage with and reconcile ourselves to it.

Experience, then, refers to going through something beyond one's own control in the form of suffering and enduring. It should be noted, however, that even though in the case of political experience it often does, this understanding of experience does not need to refer to something completely out-of-the-ordinary, exceptional and shockingly surprising. Any "field of experience" – e.g. labor, work – sets us up against our worldly conditions and are therefore ultimately not in our control. In the experience of action this feature is simply further amplified.

The preceding description seems to suggest primacy of the first-person perspective: while I cannot control the *stuff* that constitutes my experience, I do have privileged access to the experience itself. But here too, we need to elaborate. Consider Arendt's first sentences in the New School revamp of "Political Experiences": "We want to be confronted with direct experience, to *relive this period vicariously*. How is that possible and what does it mean?" Indeed! Does Arendt not commit herself to a contradiction – namely, between direct and vicarious experience – at the outset? A few lines later she continues: "here we are confronted with experiences which are not ours, perhaps partly mine, certainly none is yours". Here, many Janus-like qualities of experience spring forth.

The above quote has two main implications. On the one hand, thinking is never concerned with experience in an immediate sense, as it is lived. On the other, it also does not deal with stable facts or pieces of knowledge that have been distilled from experience. On the contrary, it

demands a dynamic re-experiencing of the events in question. This should further alert us to the issue that by identifying the role of experience in Arendt to her personal experiences – or, further, prioritizing first-person experience in the phenomenological sense – we risk a gross simplification. The point of analyzing experience is not to merely to engage in an exercise of self-reflection. If that indeed were the point, the possibilities for an experience-based political thought would be rather slim. What about events I have *not* personally experienced? We would either have to admit that it is hyperbole to say that thinking takes its bearings exclusively from experiences, as any amount of distance – temporal or spatial – between ourselves and the event would disqualify our thinking; or we would have to accept a suffocating limitation on possible topics of reflection.

These issues are resolved, I argue, once we acknowledge that *vicarious experience has an analytic primacy in Arendt's thinking* over direct, personal experience. In the above quotes, this is suggested by the reference to 'recapturing' and 'reliving' experience. A key point I want to emphasize here is that when Arendt says that thinking takes its bearings from 'experience', she refers to a process of *re-experiencing*. In other words, even when we are talking of a personally experienced event, it is vicarious experience that provides the model according to which the experience is analyzed. This complicates the subsuming of Arendt into phenomenology, where the first-person is taken as the primary starting point (see Loidolt 2018, 83).

Parenthetically, it is worth noting that the re-experiencing (*nochmals/noch einmal erfahren*) Arendt refers to is not the same as Dilthey's well-known method of re-experiencing (*Nacherleben*) in the sense of reliving of the life-relations of past actors, even though Arendt was

certainly influenced by Dilthey. Her notion of experience (*Erfahrung*) refers to the importance of ‘objective’ (in her unique sense of ‘worldly’) aspects of experience, whereas Dilthey’s *Erlebnis*-based expression is more tied to the subjective sense of life⁸. Relatedly, Arendt explicitly rejects the role of empathy that performs important work in Dilthey.

The nature and role of vicarious experience requires further explication. The experiences Arendt is interested in “Political Experiences” are, as noted, events that were “raining” on human beings who were not directly responsible for their taking place (PEN). Particularly the 1955 edition of the seminar centers on an imagined individual – apparently a homage to Arendt’s second husband Heinrich Blücher – who was born in the 1890s and went through the major events of the century. The keyword here is *imagined*: “The mental capacity to which we apply here is Imagination. I could have called this course Exercises in Imagination – The only aim is to recapture experience” (PEN)⁹. Such experiences are not simply received; in fact, they only exist because we digest them in a reflective manner, through a thoughtful encounter with what is re-presented to us. These are experiences that were never direct in the first place – and imagination is the capacity to make present “what was not given in any kind of perception but is mediated” (PEN). “*Only if you think your own thoughts can you actually experience, though still in a mediated fashion – vicariously*” (PEN).

The stepping-stone of imagination is to be found from biography and novels. Experiences would be acquired – “not in the raw but without theoretical overtones” – through course readings¹⁰. As opposed to Benjamin, Arendt has faith in the ability of the novel to tell meaningful stories about political experiences in the public world instead of being trapped in the psyche of the individual

(c.f. Benjamin 2007, 83–87; Lindroos 2001, 22–25). However, Arendt is in tentative agreement with Benjamin on the fact that experience “in the strict sense of the word” only appears when contents of individual and collective past form a conjunction (Benjamin 2007, 159). This, in any case, seems to be what she means by setting political experience apart from “personal experience or a psychological experience” (Arendt 1955, 2). It is this joint between personal and political where imagination is central¹¹. It allows the recapturing and reconstructing of experiences embedded in particular perspectives and weaves them together in order to analyze their worldly context. When seeing the events from the perspective of their sufferers, she tells the students:

“You are not supposed to feel as they felt but to imagine through learning of their ‘feelings’, thinking, etc. how you would have felt, thought, etc. *You think your own thoughts but in the place of somebody else*” (PEN).

The point of this is not simply to map how people from different identity positions, for instance, experience events. Rather, the aim is to see *the world* from as many perspectives as possible. Understanding in the political sense, as Arendt points out in *Denktagebuch*, does not mean understanding others, but to understand “the common world as it appears to others” (Arendt 2003, 451). Political experience, then, is worldly in a way that transcends simple intersubjectivity.

Notably, even the event that radiates behind all of Arendt’s thought – the emergence of totalitarianism – was a direct, personal experience for her to a limited extent. In reference to the Eichmann trial, she writes to Jaspers: “Don’t forget how little of all this I experienced directly”

(Arendt – Jaspers 1992, 481). While the letter explains why she wants to see Eichmann in flesh, “without the mediation of the printed word”, this motivation is framed in personal terms, not analytic ones. Her analysis of the concentration camps, for instance, loses nothing of its vigor for not being based on personal experiences – on the contrary.

A version of vicarious experience is also at work in the way Arendt approaches the tradition of political thought in its post-mortem existence. Her reconstruction of the “Greek experience of politics” in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere testifies to what she calls the “tremendous wealth of raw experiences” that have lost the prescriptive testament of the tradition (see Arendt 1978, 12). While reflecting on the central experience of *her* world, Arendt engages in a free play of imagination that draws from the Greeks, the Romans, the revolutionaries, and past thinkers (with particular focus on the link between their experiences and thought).

This takes us to the importance of distancing and the notion of *re-experiencing* on a more general level. As previously mentioned, vicarious experience works as a kind of a model for other forms of experience. Indeed, personal experience necessitates a deliberate act of distancing. For thinking, “direct experience establishes too close a contact” just like “mere knowledge” creates artificial barriers (Arendt 1994, 323). Imagination allows us to put things in perspective, putting things that are up close at distance, and building bridges to things that are not immediately our own (PEN).

This mediated, distanced nature of Arendt’s “literal” experience can be seen in an early essay, in which she describes the process through which Kafka “created out of a bare, 'abstract' minimum

of experience a kind of thought-landscape which, without losing in precision, harbors all the riches, varieties, and dramatic elements characteristic of ‘real life’” (Arendt 2006a, 9). In a way, this description goes beyond the simple diametrical opposition of experience and abstractness. Kafka’s stories are abstract blueprints for experience, rather than explications of lived-through experience (Arendt 1994, 77). To be brought alive, to be experienced, they require thought. They can, as it were, *only be re-experienced* because they never were ‘present’. Only *then* do we realize that he is describing the same automatic, impersonal processes that most of us face every day in modern society, and whose full meaning emerged only afterwards with the rise of totalitarianism.

The importance of distance for political experience also emerges from the short and slightly enigmatic note that is placed in the beginning of the second session of the New School version of “Political Experiences”: “advantages of vicarious experience. What does it mean that someone writes only years after actual experience? Faulkner” (PEN). The explanation in the lecture materials is austere, but it seems clear that she is referring to the fact that *A Fable* was written 20 years after the war it depicted. It is indeed indicative that Arendt thought the innermost meaning of the First World War was most vividly depicted in this novel, for two reasons. First, *pace* Benjamin, the abyss of incommunicable experience that the First World War had opened could be bridged after all. Second, this process took twenty years and was accomplished by an author who did not fight in the war.

A recurrent theme in Arendt's references to recent historical experiences is the need for temporal distance. Thinking starts, she wrote to Mary McCarthy, "after an experience of truth has struck home, so to speak" (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 24). One of the central experiences she describes in her work, the revolutionary public happiness, is "only an afterthought: [...] had I thought about my happiness, I would have stopped the act" (Arendt 2003, 761). Indeed, "every event that is remembered at all is being thought about" (PEC). Arendt is walking a tightrope here. The participant on the stage of politics is too absorbed by the activity to be able to see the connections between particulars that constitute the world. As long as the activity continues Arendt explains, "the space of appearance or the horizon does not appear". We do not see the wood for the trees, or perhaps we do not see the "the treeless plain" that is the space of appearance of the forest (PEN). On the other hand, she also distances herself from the philosophy of history in the Hegelian fashion. Political thought, for Arendt, needs to find its ways in midst of the events, not knowing the end of the story, or knowing it "only partially". Here, it is the new aspects of the events that provide needed clues: "We single out what mattered and what had not been seen before" (PEC).

The element of distance in, and mediated nature of, experience emerges from the nature of thinking itself. Thought-things are always representations, i.e. experiences that have been dematerialized into images that can be invoked at will (see Arendt 1978, 201, 85–87). At the same time, it is crucial that thinking retains its link to experience, and vice versa since their interdependence works both ways. Thinking without experience is blind, but non-reflected experience is overrated: "All thought arises out of experience, but no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking"

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(Arendt 1978, 13–14). This takes us to another Janus-like quality of Arendtian experience, namely its location at the boundary between the visible and the invisible. In the letter to Heidegger quoted previously, Arendt notes that while both thinking and knowing rely on experience, thinking “pursues the invisible that is specifically given in each experience” (Arendt and Heidegger 2004, 174). Unlike the empiricist and Kantian conceptions of experience, from which the approaches criticized by Scott also draw upon, Arendt’s interest is in *meaning*, as opposed to the intellect and knowing that remain at the ‘visible’ level and merely only apply pre-given concepts (Arendt 1978, 87).

To understand this reference to the invisible element in experience, it is fruitful to look into Arendt’s use of Solon as an exemplar of political thinking as opposed to philosophy. In “Philosophy and Politics”, a course taught one year after the New School “Political Experiences”, Solon is characterized as “somebody who asked himself the general questions while he cared for particulars”. While both Solon and later philosophers think in terms of generalities, Solon’s generalities are ones we constantly use in politics (justice, happiness, courage) whereas philosophers think about the most general terms of all, such as Being (Arendt 1969, 9–10).

The difference between philosophy and political thought is crucial. Philosophy’s invisible is the general and the eternal, whereas political thought remains anchored to the world. While thinking “deals with the invisibles in all experience and always tends to generalize”, there is a danger involved in this generalization. It is easy to exchange the “arbitrariness and contingency of the

concrete” to equal arbitrary necessity of conceptual systems (Arendt 1978, 213; Arendt 2003, 554; my translation). Arendt insists therefore, “No theories, forget all theories” (PEN, 1). She does not quite say what theory precisely is, but seems to suggest that it is something produced – “made” – by a particular set of “professional thinkers”. The “exercises in imagination” or indeed “exercises in political thought” that Arendt talks about are based on the idea of theorizing without “making” or “applying” a theory. As the term exercise suggests, this means engaging in an essayistic activity that is never finished.

The point, then, is to assume the “location of the theorists”, between the “two forces acting upon man out of which he thinks and acts”, i.e. the past and the future (PEC; see also Arendt 2006a, 7–11). It is only in relation to temporality – and other perspectives, as discussed above – that the meaning of experience, its invisible element, becomes available. Sometimes, as we saw, this might take several decades. Arendt's notion of experience would be best illustrated, not by the Benjaminian *Angelus Novus*, but rather by the image of Janus that has its eyes locked on the past – its catastrophes as well as the pearls and corals – *and* on the future, not as a continuation of the present but rather something unknown that is approaching us.

3 Re-experiencing, language, and storytelling

Thus far, we have established that experience for Arendt is a process in which the world throws us against new realities, makes us face something that is not in our control. The meaning of experience has furthermore been identified with a thoughtful encounter, via *re-experiencing*, with the invisible elements of what is immediately given. The above discussion distinguished

Arendt from the approaches to experience that focus on the importance of the personal, immediate experience. In this section, I will address the relationship between experience and language – perhaps the thorniest issue in the debates on the nature of experience in political theory.

First, let us consider the requirement of distance once more. In the preface she wrote for J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors*, Arendt is more specific on the reasons why a clear perception of experience requires the passage of time. It took Gray fourteen years, she writes, to “learn ‘simplicity’ and to unlearn ‘the simplification of abstract thinking’, to become fluent in the art and the language of ‘concrete’ thoughts and feelings” (Arendt 1967a, viii). What is the “language of the concrete”? What does she mean by the simplifications of abstract thinking? To answer the latter question, we need to refer to the role of popular language discussed in the first section of this article. By making clichés of the words that originally registered novelty in the world, everyday speech tends to move away from the shock of reality. Various frames – linguistic wholes that organize experience – are readily available, and tend to direct thinking to the safe and beaten path. New experiences are seen not only in the light of old experiences but also in the light of abstractions derived from past experiences¹². In this way, we fail to sense the shock of the event. Recalling Arendt's rejection of “theories” in “Political Experiences”, we can assert that approaching experience from the vantage point of a pre-articulated theory – say, the Marxists view of history – takes this tendency of ordinary language step further. It effectively means forcing the particulars given to us by experience into the mold of determinant judgment.

Significantly, this is also a criticism levied against the likes of Scott, Agamben, and Nancy. It is posited that their views lead to the dominance of experience by theory, in the guise of deconstructing the foundational role of experience (Alcoff 2000, 45–46; Blencowe 2012; Cavarero 2002). Further, the idea of theory-as-a-product, as opposed to *theorizing-as-an-activity*, remains in the framework defined by epistemology. Knowing as a cognitive activity is oriented by its results (warranted claims), while theorizing is resultless and has no use for unshakeable bedrocks of any kind.

From Scott's perspective experience cannot have a positive role to play in relation to theory because it is filtered through conceptual categories that reflect existing ideologies. For her, experience "does not happen outside established meanings" (Scott 1991, 793). However, for the politically most interesting and thought-provoking experiences we could say that this is *exactly* where it happens. Experience sets us face-to-face with novelty, shock, and surprise that disturb what our ordinary linguistic practices produce as 'reality'. Political experience forces us to *reflect* upon established meanings and concepts. But Arendt is also sensitive to the issues raised by Scott, as was hinted by the discussion on what I above called "framing". How is it possible (*is* it possible), then, to ponder if "contemporary theories reflect or adequate to the central political experiences of the century" (PEC)?

It is often posited (e.g. Ankersmit 2005; Kruks 2001) that unless experience is seen as external to language, it is deprived of all power to change the way we think. Either there is no compromise between language and experience or language commands the forms of experience. What the Arendtian concept of experience allows us to see, on the contrary, is that unless experience

comes to language it is powerless. With Arendt, I argue, we have to say *that there is no experience in any meaningful sense unless it is re-experienced in thought and allowed to register its impact on language*. Before this comes about, there is only an occurrence, but no event and no experience, properly speaking. To see how this thought works, we must add to the themes of vicariousness and re-experiencing the slightly more well-known details of what Arendt calls “poetic thinking”.

For Arendt, thinking begins with *thaumadzein*, the speechless horror or wonder in the face of what the world presents to us. This speechless wonder and horror can also be identified with what Arendt called the “shock of reality”. This does not have to mean – as a critic might suggest – that experience in the sense of the “shock” always involves an unwarranted appeal to extra-linguistic foundations. As such, this ground level of experience reveals very little. It does not give us meaning. Therefore, to even recognize the shock of reality as an experience that has implications for us, there needs to be a linguistic intervention. “An experience,” Arendt writes to McCarthy, “makes its appearance only when it is being said” (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 294). What is notable here is that there is no clear boundary between non-linguistic experience and speech. Nor could there be. In political action, speech and deeds usually accompany each other. Given further that the use of language itself can itself be considered a form of experience, the whole dichotomy of language *versus* experience seems misguided.

For Arendt, an experience only becomes something we can relate ourselves to once it enters language. Political phenomena, the appearances to which thought must remain bound to, need

speech “in order to be manifest at all” (Arendt 2006b, 9). In this sense, it is true that “experience is a linguistic event”, as Scott writes (Scott 1991, 793). Events and experience are inescapably intertwined with language as a medium that not only transmits experiences to others, but brings them into existence. Here, we return to the importance of everyday speech once again. “All thought starts and departs from everyday speech”, Arendt writes in *Denktagebuch*, and continues: “The need to think arises whenever we find that words taken in their ordinary sense are obscuring rather than revealing”. While ordinary language can coin new words and alert us to novelties, it is also prone to succumbing novelty to existing linguistic frames and lumping disparate phenomena together. In that case, we need to stop and think in order to reconcile ourselves with what has taken place. As such, “the process of clarification that occurs in the thinking process comes about through distinctions.” (Arendt 2003, 770, 48).

The need for new words for novelties, which is true for the whole realm of appearances, “is doubly true for the political sphere of life” (Arendt 2006b, 26). To avoid the pitfalls of clichés and analogies, it is not enough that we have records and memories of events. Rather, as Arendt explains in *On Revolution* where these issues receive perhaps their most powerful treatment, experiences need to be “condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions” (Arendt 2006b, 212). Unless they become hosted by a conceptual framework specifically fitted for them, events and experiences lose their uniqueness and become distorted. The emphasis here, note, is on the “specifically fitted for them”. Often, theoretical approaches have a tendency to disregard experience through false universalism and general concepts. Yet, the answer is not the aversion of conceptual thought as such. We can equally lose our grasp on experience this way. This is what, in Arendt’s view, happened to the American Revolution when it was interpreted through

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theories that originally emerged from quite disparate political experiences, such as the English or the French Revolution (Arendt 2006b, 212).

Here the importance of poetic thinking – by which Arendt means the kind of thought that is sensitive to the link between metaphor and experience (Arendt 1968b, 166, 201, 205) – is pushed on us. Political and historical sciences arrive at their concepts by taking a particular act or incident as exemplary, and seeing something in it that is perceivable in other instances too: “words relating to concepts (such as justice, courage, etc.) relate primarily not to ideas in my head but to experiences I had in the world of appearances (just deeds, courageous acts, etc.)” (Arendt 2003, 772). The poet, the historian, and the novelist are the particular vocations named by Arendt as those whose role it is to find ways of transferring or carrying over (*metapherein*) experience into the language of thought, to the realm of the invisible. Metaphors, conceptual frameworks, and “single brief sentences and condensed aphorisms” such as those found in Faulkner’s novels give us the “words we live by” (Arendt 2006b, 272, 307n4). The task of poetic thinking consists largely of crafting such words and carefully distinguishing them from each other, so that the visible and the invisible can come together. Through such activity, we might finally find a way to establish a resonance, a *correspondence* – but not in the epistemic sense of the word – between the new realities that set the process off and ourselves (Cornelissen 2016, 77, 85)¹³. This is the “language of the concrete” that Arendt found in Gray’s work.

I think Parekh takes Arendt too much into a generally phenomenological direction when he posits that the conceptual capture of experience “is ‘valid’ if it succeeds in articulating its structure” (Parekh 1981, 11, 54, 68–69, 81–83). Taking the poetic nature of language into

consideration, there are no grounds for supposing that Arendt thinks there is a structure to be discovered in experience. The scare quotes notwithstanding, the term validity appears worrisome, as it suggests the framing of the question through epistemology.

Our relation to political experiences is one of reconciliation with inescapable (while originally contingent) facts (PEC; PEN; see also Arendt 1994, 308; Berkowitz 2016). *Pace* Lara's interpretation, Arendt was not interested in "mastering" a past (c.f. Lara 2007, 38). All one can do, she argues in "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing", is to "know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge" (Arendt 1968b, 20). According to Arendt, in order to achieve this kind of endurance in the face of what is inescapably the case, we need stories. As stories give some "humanly comprehensible meaning" to the facts – "sheer happenings" – that make up the human world (Arendt 1968b, 104; Arendt 2006a, 245, 257). While she believes that facts are hardly transparent or axiomatic, Arendt also disagrees with some later thinkers like Hayden White who see narrative structures as something *imposed* on the stuff of the world. Against this, Arendt holds that stories "grow out of what men do and endure" quite naturally (Arendt 2006b, 212). There is a poetic resonance – not an abyss – between our narration and the events themselves.

Contrary to the oral tradition of storytelling alluded to by Benjamin, Arendt places immense importance on the written word, including the intersecting genres of poetry, novels, histories, and essays¹⁴. In fact, considering the importance of re-experiencing for Arendt's notion of political experience, she comes rather close to Ellison's description of the American novel as a frontier that while describing experience, also creates it (Ellison 1995, 183). For Arendt, the genre of

tragedy is illustrative here. Using the example of *A Fable*, Arendt summarizes her position in a way that brings together most of the elements of political experience discussed above.

“The tragic hero becomes knowledgeable by *re-experiencing* what has been done in the way of *suffering*, and in this *pathos*, in resuffering the past, the network of individual acts is transformed into an *event*, a significant whole. The dramatic climax of tragedy occurs when the *actor turns into a sufferer*.” (Arendt 1968b, 20–21).

The relation between experience and *pathos* is made clear, the link between action and suffering is highlighted, and the role of re-experiencing is emphasized for understanding political events *qua* events. *A Fable*, for example, illuminates the nature of modern war as an almost unstoppable force that forces humanity into namelessness (the two main actors in it, the corporal and the Battalion runner remain unnamed for most of the novel). And the novel ends with the words of the old quartermaster general, suggesting reconciliation with – not acceptance of – the evils in the world: “I’m not laughing. What you see are tears” (Faulkner 1994, 483).

This example of tragedies reveals clues regarding Arendt’s notion of experience in more general terms. As she continues in the Lessing essay, “Even non-tragic plots become genuine *events* only when they are *experienced a second time* in the form of suffering by memory operating retrospectively and perspectively.” (Arendt 1968b, 21). Storytelling seems to bring forth an important aspect regarding the temporal dimension of experiencing/re-experiencing. Following Anne O’Byrne’s discussion on natality, we could refer here too to *syncopated temporality*, i.e. a “mode of being in time that can grasp itself only belatedly” (O’Byrne 2010, 95). What this means in this context is that the experience of a political event turns out to be a particular

experience only when it is *re-experienced* in the space between the past and the future. Thoughtful attention to experiences, analogously to action, actively embraces something that would have been “passively suffered anyhow” (Arendt 1998, 208). As the word *Erfahrung*, which contains *Fahrt* (journey), itself suggests, temporal distance plays an indispensable role here. Once enough time has passed, a relatively stable meaning emerges, one that endures in the chronicle of humankind: “The tragic impact of this repetition in lamentation affects one of the key elements of all action; it establishes its meaning and that permanent significance which then enters into history” (Arendt 1968b, 21). Arendt is not merely referring to wars and other catastrophes, but equally to other events such as revolutions.

Arendt emphasizes that the “tears of remembrance” in tragedy lead to reconciliation and endurance (Arendt 2006a, 45; Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 505–507). The tragic form also testifies to the Janus-face of non-sovereign action, and presents such action as a worldly activity that calls for reflective analysis rather than formulaic solutions (see e.g. Nussbaum 2001, 14, 69; Janover 2003, 45). However, Arendt does not mean to suggest that experience can only be grasped through tragic plots. On the contrary, she suggested that when faced with terrors of totalitarianism or the political experiences of individual in the modern society, comedy, satire, and irony are capable of bringing about a certain kind of reconciliation in the mode of re-experiencing events: “laughter helps one to find a place in the world, but ironically, which is to say, without selling one’s soul to it” (Arendt 1968b, 16).

4 Conclusion

This article has sought to reconstruct Arendt's Janus-faced concept of political experience. Instead of tracing the influence (which certainly exists) of phenomenology, Kant, or other thinkers on Arendt's concept, my aim has been to focus on its originality¹⁵. What has emerged in the view is a notion of experience that in important ways avoids the usual routes taken by theoretical attempts to define experience. For her, the term denotes neither receptive knowledge based on direct perception with the guidance of existing categories, nor accumulated wisdom from the past, nor a wished-for dimension of existence ungraspable through conceptual language. Instead, experience can be seen as a process in which we are forced to face something beyond our conscious control, something that only appears in the view once we *re-experience* it, name it, and distinguish it from other things we are familiar with.

There perhaps does not need to be a universal answer to the question of what experience is, but Arendt provides a thought-provoking perspective. The relevance of the concept of experience reconstructed in this article emerges from two main directions: in relation to Arendt and to contemporary political theory. The reasons experience is so important to Arendt are various. At the most fundamental level, the answer emerges "from the very process of living" – an existential need to reconcile ourselves with what unavoidably exists, or "what we do and what we suffer" (Arendt 1994, 309). Experience also plays a key role in her conceptualization of political theory. Understanding experience in the way presented, rather than as phenomenological or personal, challenges interpretations in which Arendt is nonchalantly integrated to phenomenological, liberal, Nancyan and other theoretical frameworks. It affects the interpretation of action in her work, which can no longer be viewed as an experience that is knowingly strived-for.

What makes her notion of experience particularly relevant for us today, however, is its impact on our understanding of political theory. Her notion acknowledges that we need ‘abstractions’ in order to think through concrete experience, and notes the peculiarity of having “to see in order to perceive what we cannot see” (Arendt and Heidegger 2004, 174). In fact, Arendt’s is one of the most thorough presentations of the relationship between theory and experience, which has been one of the nodal points of recent debates in political theory. For Arendt, the role of political theory is to *save appearances* – experiences – instead of explaining them away. The latter happens for instance if experience is explained as a discursive effect. Unlike Kruks, Ankersmit, and others that emphasize the extra-linguistic nature of experience, Arendt insists, however, that experience becomes an appearance to be “saved” only when it enters language. The disturbing role of experience vis-à-vis existing conceptual frameworks is *itself* dependent on language. The process of *metapherein* “creates” the experience that shows us the limits of our current vocabulary. If this fails, if we cannot *re-experience* what has taken place, there is no experience – simply an occurrence bound to be ignored and passed over.

The disturbing role of experience in relation to existing patterns of thought and language-use should also make us sensitive to the ways in which the received vocabulary within political or feminist theory also blinds us to certain experiences. This is what is lost when the relationship between language and experience is presented through the metaphor of ‘construction’. At the very least, if it is postulated that subjects are constituted through experience, we may lose sight of political events that interrupt this process of constitution. By encouraging us to look at the issue from a “worldly”, rather than subject-centered, perspective, Arendt invites us to consider

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the ability of events to remake our theoretical vocabularies. Theory is a powerful tool of organizing experience. It is therefore crucial to permit for the possibility of experience to reorganize theory in surprising ways as we try to come to terms with events. In other words, we need to be vigilant to see what our current vocabularies make impossible for us to see.

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¹ This is in concordance with Arendt's own statements for instance in the Gaus interview (Arendt 1994, 20). As I hope to show, however, this is not the whole truth about her notion of experience.

² This move is related to the one proposed by Zerilli in relation to freedom and judgment in the context of feminist theory (Zerilli 2005, 10–16, 138)

³ It could be argued that Arendt uses the word 'experience' in a similar manner to 'meaning', which she also never defines.

⁴ The only discussions of these lectures known to me are Heuer (2007) and Kohn and Young-Bruehl (2007).

⁵ When quoting from the lecture materials, I correct minor spelling errors but leave the syntax and grammar untouched.

⁶ This statement contains a tacit reference to Rahel Varnhagen, who declared: "What am I doing? Nothing. I am letting life rain upon me" (Arendt 2000, 81).

⁷ Heller, having heard that his work is used in the course, ended up co-teaching the session in which *Catch-22* was discussed.

⁸ On Dilthey, see Jay 2005, 230–231.

⁹ Jerome Kohn has noted that experience for Arendt stands for "the mind's imaginative encounter with reality, with those events that affect human lives and sometimes, in extreme cases, destroy parts of the human world" (Kohn 2010, 181–182).

¹⁰ In addition to the 'usual suspects' (Faulkner, Kafka, Brecht, and Char), the course readings also include Hemingway, Jünger, Malraux, Orwell, Camus, Sartre, and works of historians and scientists, such as Oppenheimer (for details, see Heuer 2007, 198–199).

¹¹ The various roles of imagination in Arendt are well known, and I will not focus on them here. Central here is the capacity of imagination to interrupt the epistemic presentation that functions exclusively on the axes of true and false (see Zerilli 2005, 59).

¹² While not explicitly mentioned here, this also relates to the tendency to read one "field of experience" through experiences emerging elsewhere, such as interpreting thinking or acting through the experience of making.

¹³ This resembles (and perhaps refers to) Benjamin's notion of 'correspondence' as one of the three temporalities of experience, the lost fragments of the tradition that can potentially form surprising connections to the present. See Lindroos 2001, 26, 29.

¹⁴ There is an etymological link between experience, experiment, and the essay. The essay is a poetic form that allows one to gain experience, through exercises and trials, in the thinking of experiences.

¹⁵ The best explorations of how Arendt draws from phenomenological notion of experience are Borren (2013) and Loidolt (2018, 76–93). These are insightful and illuminating accounts that complement the view presented here. However, by presenting her as a phenomenologists, they necessarily lose some of Arendt's originality and downplay other influences (Benjamin, Aristotle, Kant, Augustine, novels, historiography, poetry). Similarly, Althaus's (2000) illuminating book fails to explain how Arendt's concept of experience differs from Koselleck and others discussed by Althaus.