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# The impurity of *praxis*: Arendt and Agamben

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## Abstract

If politics is understood as a foundational and open-ended activity, a general problem that arises from such a framing concerns the question of how to sustain the possibility of continuous openings without converting action into permanence and closure. In this article, we approach this problematic by treating Hannah Arendt as an exemplary figure in the current of political thought that emphasizes the indeterminate nature of action. We focus more specifically on how Arendt addressed the question of sustaining action by exploring the role of forgiveness, promises, divided power, and principles of action in her thought. While we show that the task of sustaining the indeterminacy of action partly remains an unresolvable paradox for Arendt, a general force underpinning the thought of Giorgio Agamben sheds new light on this paradox. Rather than affirming radical openness and pure *praxis* as such, Agamben's work helps accentuate the need of a certain contamination of *praxis* by its own limit or apparent opposite. Importantly, this allows us to interpret Arendt and the paradoxical task of bestowing some degree of permanence to the open horizon of political action in a decidedly positive light: that *praxis* implies a moment of impurity is the very force that sustains it without sacrificing its indeterminate nature.

**Keywords** Praxis · Founding · Political action · Arendt · Agamben

## 1 Introduction

If politics is approached as an activity, one of the most general and clearly detectable lines of division between various understandings of politics, academic or popular, runs between openness and determinacy. On the one hand, political action may be

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pictured in the image of foundational acts, radical interruptions, and the mobilization of constituent power. On the other hand, an emphasis on governance, order, and the teleological dimension of politics is more clearly present in other conceptions. In this article, we focus on the former, namely political action understood as an open-ended praxis. More specifically, we attempt to delineate and address an ambiguity regarding the possibilities of sustaining political action that remains rooted in such understandings of politics. In very simple terms, if one affirms political action that always starts and interrupts, how does one gain some degree of continuity and orientation? While this problematic is clearly present in revolutionary movements, it can be argued to haunt divergent forms of public protests more generally: once the crowd disperses, there is no immediate answer as to how its force continues to thrive.

In this article, we approach this problematic on a theoretical level by focusing on the thought of Hannah Arendt, a figure for whom the notion of founding and novelty is of paramount importance. One of the most familiar traits of Hannah Arendt's political thought is indeed her view of politics as an activity of starting new things; political actors are heroic agents who step into the light of the public and thrust human affairs into new directions. On the other hand, this powerful image of willed agency that interrupts stagnated processes is also, throughout Arendt's work, framed as utterly frail, indeterminate, and beyond anyone's control. It is this dimension of politics that she often described as the necessary "price" of the experience of politics – when acting, one must embrace the fact that nothing can ultimately be controlled and mastered with absolute certainty.

As we argue in this article, the indeterminacy of action is not only an unfortunate aspect that political agents must reckon with once having started something new but points to a more intricate analysis of how action may be sustained over the course of time. Arendt's warnings against substituting action with other activities and rationales is always accompanied by an explication of how to balance action in such a way that it may persist and proliferate without losing its open-ended nature; one of her general arguments was that only by sustaining the inherently uncontrollable character of action can human beings dwell in something called a political community. Yet, while Arendt indeed emphasizes the importance of sustaining the contingency of action, she often does so in a somewhat negative mood by addressing it as the most difficult and paradoxical task of any political undertaking. This is perhaps most clearly pronounced in *On Revolution* where Arendt explicitly states that the obvious paradox of all revolutionary movements is that without any degree of permanence, foundational acts remain the exclusive experience of a generation of founders; on the other hand, if this problem is solved by creating permanent structures, we can no longer speak of action with an end in itself.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we seek to view this paradox in a more positive light by approaching it through the work of a key contemporary political thinker, namely Giorgio Agamben. As we demonstrate below, a central strategy developed in Agamben's work implies that the canonical or established application of any particular human activity can be deactivated or suspended, which in turn activates the possibility of doing otherwise and inventing new uses of the activity in question. Importantly, this does not mean that the conventional use is destroyed

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt 2006a.

completely but that it may well coexist with the alternative one, that is, Agamben's approach allows us to understand human activities as inherently ambivalent. From this perspective, Arendt's *praxis* can be understood as slightly contaminated by its apparent opposite or alternative and this is ultimately not an unresolvable paradox but the very mechanism that generates more possibilities of action.

In the following section, we first briefly outline how vulnerability and open-endedness are necessary aspects of political action in Arendt's understanding. Against this background, we dedicate the subsequent section to an exploration of how Arendt "solved" the question of how to balance and sustain action given its fragility. To this end, we first address her discussion of forgiving and making promises and then focus in particular on her understanding of power and principles of action. In the last section, we scrutinize certain ambiguities regarding the continuity of politics that arise from Arendt's account and demonstrate that a central logic underpinning Agamben's overall project allows us to dissolve some of this ambiguity and interpret it in a more positive key. Importantly, the elements of continuity present in Arendt's thought, addressed in Sect. 3, seem to support such a view. Rather than providing a completely novel interpretation of Arendt's thought, the main objective of this article is to further clarify what is at stake in the paradox identified by herself and to offer a less contradictory view on it in the light of Agamben's thought.

## 2 The price of freedom

As already mentioned above, political action is in Arendt's conception inherently vulnerable, evanescent, and unpredictable. If one wanted to express this understanding of human action on the most general level, one could perhaps start with her reminder of the fact that human life itself belongs to a series of "infinite improbabilities"; from the perspective of the constant reproduction of life processes, all new humans arriving on Earth are "miracles," equipped with the capacity to initiate new beginnings.<sup>2</sup> It is this capacity that she often described by citing Augustine's phrase "that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody."<sup>3</sup>

Political action is *praxis*, an activity with no end other than itself, as Arendt posits in the most systematic manner in *The Human Condition* through her well-known triad of labor, work, and action.<sup>4</sup> It is this processual character of action that forms the background of the many layers and nuances of Arendt's characterization of politics, a great part of which highlights the specific risks or downsides of this inherent intangibility. For instance, as Arendt remarks in various contexts, action rarely attains its goal simply because it cannot produce external ends – no matter how much we would like politics to resolve great questions like poverty and hunger, politics cannot attain this. In fact, as Arendt notes in the context of analyzing the founding of America, one might suspect that slavery and the misery of the many have enabled a handful of men

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt (2006b, p. 168).

<sup>3</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 177), see also Arendt (2006b, p.166).

<sup>4</sup> Arendt (1998).

to experience freedom.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, action itself seems to harbor a tendency to become degraded if left unattended; such stagnation and decay often slowly takes place over the course of centuries without any clear external cause.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, one of the persisting themes in Arendt's work is her lamentation over the tendency of action to be conflated with other activities. She found some of the main culprits in philosophy and argued throughout her work that philosophers have mostly been occupied with eliminating precisely the aspects that are indispensable to politics: unpredictability, relativity, and contingency. Thus, as she famously put it in the often-cited 1964 interview by Günther Gauss, she wanted to "look at politics with eyes unclouded by philosophy."<sup>7</sup> Philosophy was, however, not the only line of business to receive its critique from Arendt; she was also skeptical about scientists, whether from the natural or human sciences, insofar as their enterprise consisted in explaining everything within the clear logic of cause and effect. Historians were in Arendt's view likewise inclined toward reconstructing, with the wisdom of hindsight, one whole story with a clear end, obscuring in this way the various contingencies and possible courses of action that might have taken place. Her generally critical attitude toward converting this technique of the historian to a philosophy of history is captured for instance in the essay *Understanding and Politics*: "It is only natural [for the historian] to see in history a story with many ends and no beginning; and this inclination becomes really dangerous only when – for whatever reasons – people begin to make a philosophy out of history as it presents itself to the professional eyes of the historian."<sup>8</sup> The "danger" lies precisely in the true meaning of political action – the experience of freedom rather than the production of external ends – becoming obscured or misunderstood.

In other words, humans have the capacity to begin something new and experience political freedom, but this freedom comes, as Arendt frequently phrases it, with a price. As she notes toward the end of her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, "professional thinkers, whether philosophers or scientists, have not been "pleased with freedom", and its ineluctable randomness; they have been unwilling to pay the price of contingency for the questionable gift of spontaneity, of being able to do what could also be left undone."<sup>9</sup> Thus, to say yes to politics and the new means that one welcomes contingency, randomness, relativity; that one accepts the fact that the realm of human affairs can never offer us perfect security or certainty. Without uncertainty, there is no freedom either.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 61).

<sup>6</sup> Arendt (2006b, p. 167).

<sup>7</sup> Arendt (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Arendt (2005, p. 320).

<sup>9</sup> Arendt (1978, p. 198).

### 3 Within reach of action: forgiveness, promises, power, and principles

How to sustain action, then, given that it is always at the risk of slipping through one's fingers or being conflated with something else in the hope of gaining a sense of control? There are some indications in Arendt's work of the importance of *work* for the sustenance of action. Although the activity of work is external to politics proper in Arendt's view, she sometimes discusses laws (which are subsumed under work in Arendt's understanding) as well as physical surroundings – such as the city-state – as stabilizing elements that give shelter to action; they provide a space in which action can occur. In this section, however, we shall address elements that are not external to action but sustain and augment action from *within*. We start by summarizing Arendt's understanding of the faculties of forgiving and making promises and then turn our focus to her engagement with principles of action and the divisibility of power. As we shall see, the latter two are interlaced with Arendt's engagement with the thought of Montesquieu and in this respect, our exploration builds on and contributes to recent discussions of the French writer's influence on Arendt's thought.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of engaging with these dimensions of Arendt's work is to provide a background to the following section, in which we further explore an ambiguity regarding the continuity of action that Arendt herself brings up most explicitly in *On Revolution*.

In the last two sections of the chapter on action in *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses the capacities of forgiving and making promises as “remedies” against two inevitable aspects of action's contingency, namely its *irreversibility* and *unpredictability*. Forgiving has the power to release us from the damage caused by past deeds, the consequences of which we could never have known or mastered completely because of the very uncontrollable nature of action. Unlike vengeance, which can in Arendt's view only result in an endless circle of reactions that form an automatic process of their own, forgiving installs a new break in the midst of human affairs and can in this way restore the possibility of starting new actions.<sup>11</sup> Promises, on the other hand, function in Arendt's understanding as “guideposts” for the future, which always remains uncertain.<sup>12</sup> That promise-making is a central force in politics is evident, she argues, if one takes into consideration the importance of contracts, covenants, and pacts for the Western political tradition (and probably others) – these are precisely attempts at bestowing some degree of orientation and stability to the indeterminate and unpredictable web of processes that human action unleashes.

What Arendt makes clear both in the case of forgiving and making promises is that we are dealing with mechanisms that are not derived from outside or above action. Unlike the *animal laborans* who is released from the cyclical processes of life through a tangible world erected by man in his capacity of *homo faber*, the cure against the potential damages of action “does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, forgiveness and promises are ‘control mechanisms built

<sup>10</sup> Cane (2015); Muldoon (2016); Näsström (2014); Sirczuk (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Arendt (1998, pp. 240–241).

<sup>12</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 244).

<sup>13</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 236).

into the very faculty to start new and unending processes.”<sup>14</sup> It is in this vein that we shall now explore Arendt’s understanding of power and principles of action. Like forgiving and making promises, these elements are available within action itself, or, as Arendt also puts it, they are within “action own reach.”<sup>15</sup>

Power is *potential*, as Arendt lays out in the chapter on action in *The Human Condition*, deriving the word here from the German adjective *möglich*, as well as *potentia* and *dynamis*, power in Latin and Greek respectively. As potential, power cannot be possessed or applied like force or strength but becomes manifest only when actualized. Power differs from force and strength also in the sense that it is always generated by the many – it applies to a plurality of humans that, by acting in concert, generate power. In this sense, “human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, argues Arendt in this context, the city state has remained “paradigmatic” of political organization in the Western tradition, for it shows clearly how power rests on the continuous presence of the many. This is also what she credits Montesquieu with realizing when he depicted the tyrant as ultimately doomed to ruination; he understood that the isolation of the ruler “prevents the development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public realm but in its entirety; it generates, in other words, impotence as naturally as other bodies politic generate power.”<sup>17</sup> It could be further underlined that to actualize power does not point to *exhausting* it in the act – Arendt clearly understands actualization in terms of Aristotle’s *energeia*, as being-in-act, not in the sense of bringing to completion. Conversely, when power is not exercised, it is not because it has been used up to materialize into something else, but simply because there is no plurality of men to keep it at work: “[Power] springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”<sup>18</sup>

In *On Revolution*, Arendt explicates Montesquieu’s paramount importance for the American Revolution by tracing it back to his understanding of the nature of power, arguing that Montesquieu was unique among Western thinkers in his understanding of power as potential, or as expressed here, power as residing in the “I-can”:

It was precisely because Montesquieu – unique in this respect among the sources from which the founders drew their political wisdom – had maintained that power and freedom belonged together; that, conceptually speaking, political freedom did not reside in the I-will, but in the I-can, and that therefore the political realm must be construed and constituted in a way in which power and freedom would be combined, that we find his name invoked in practically all debates on constitution.<sup>19</sup>

Crucially important among Montesquieu’s insights was, according to Arendt, his view of the divisibility of power; that power can be stopped *and* still be kept intact” and

<sup>14</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 246).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 201).

<sup>17</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 202).

<sup>18</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 200).

<sup>19</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 141).

that the separation of powers is in fact liable to generate more power.<sup>20</sup> Thus, contra the conventional understanding of Montesquieu's separation of powers as a way to control the power of each power source, Arendt interprets his genius as consisting in realizing that divided power is first and foremost a way of *increasing* power. This was in her view also how the American founders understood it – their concern was not whether one party or another would get hold of too much power, but whether multiple power sources would continue to support one another so as to increase power.

Toward the end of *On Revolution*, Arendt further discusses the divisibility of power as a principle of political action. As Lucy Cane also notes, the concept of principle is in fact one of the most important ones in the entire book.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the power principle of division, Arendt lists for instance public happiness, public freedom, mutual promise, mutual covenant, and mutual agreement among the leading principles of both the French and American revolutions. In a certain sense, all these principles are closely related to the fact of plurality as they arise out of the very experience of acting together. This is the way in which Arendt approaches principles like mutual covenant in the case of the founding of America – regardless of any theoretical doctrine or agenda, the very fact that they embarked upon a mutual enterprise gave rise to mutual agreements: “[The] federal principle, the principle of league and alliance among separate units, arises out of the elementary conditions of action itself.”<sup>22</sup> This way, power, principles, as well as action, share the common ground of being always already divided into a plurality and this division is precisely what sustains them and keeps them in motion.

Although never presented as a fully developed and coherent framework, principles can be argued to form an important source of continuity for action as Arendt understands it; principles allow action to be oriented toward a certain direction, yet they are not prescriptions of what goals or ends should be attained. As Arendt argues in the essay *What is Freedom?*, with explicit reference to Montesquieu, “[principles] do not operate from within the self as motives do – ‘mine own deformity’ or ‘my fair proportion’ – but inspire, as it were, from without; and they are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in the light of its principle.”<sup>23</sup> In the sense that principles limit both the inherent arbitrariness of action and its tendency to be converted into a means-end dimension, James Muldoon accurately describes them as a kind of “auto-limitation” of action.<sup>24</sup> And insofar as they can be utilized to judge our aims, they might even be extended to shedding light on which goals are worth pursuing and which are not, as Cane suggests.<sup>25</sup>

Principles are also closely connected to Arendt's idea of beginnings as fundamental to the human experience of action. She notes that the revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic appealed to universal and divine rights of man to justify their cause, and this is of course something that seems to haunt all beginnings. Commenting on

<sup>20</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 142), italics in original.

<sup>21</sup> Cane (2015).

<sup>22</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 259).

<sup>23</sup> Arendt (2006b, p. 150–151).

<sup>24</sup> Muldoon (2016).

<sup>25</sup> Cane (2015).



the ultimate mystery of where such beginnings emerge from, she writes in a passage in *The Life of the Mind*: “[Nothing] seems so shrouded in darkness and mystery as that ‘In the beginning,’ not only of the human species as distinguished from other living organisms, but also of the enormous variety of indubitably human societies.”<sup>26</sup> Arendt’s “solution” to this mystery is that action simply emerges, not out of a divine or natural cause, but simply because at some point a group of people decides to act. And this act carries with it its own principle, which arises out of the experience of acting itself: “What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries with it its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval.”<sup>27</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that principles are both what are brought to light at the beginning and what sustain and animate action while it lasts; they can be “repeated time and again” without losing any of their validity.<sup>28</sup> Seen from the perspective of principles, action is not merely about beginning something new in the sense of disrupting an existing order but about supporting and keeping action alive over the course of time, an aspect that seems obvious especially in the context of a revolution. It is precisely the inability of the Founding Fathers to keep the initial principles and the founding “spirit” alive that Arendt continuously brings up, concluding that the once animating principles were regrettably converted into “social values” guiding an unconditioned concern with private welfare.<sup>29</sup>

Patchen Markell makes a similar argument regarding the continuity of action in his close reading of Arendt’s interpretation of the concept of rule and the way it connects with her idea of beginnings.<sup>30</sup> Arendt’s critique of rule is rather well-known; it is precisely one of the key complaints she put forward when criticizing philosophy. Plato, for instance, was in Arendt’s view perfectly conscious of the fact that the spheres he relied on (such as the household) when imposing the concept of rulership on politics were extraneous to politics proper. Originally, in Arendt’s interpretation, the Greek verbs *arkhein* (covering both beginning and ruling in classical Greek, Arendt reminds us) and *prattein* (acting) were closely connected; those who initiate a beginning are in Arendt’s understanding not simply leaders who command others to execute their orders but initiators that need others to carry out the act.<sup>31</sup> It is this close relatedness that she argues has been gradually lost ever since antiquity, leading to an understanding of leaders and followers as two separate units rather than interconnected activities.<sup>32</sup> Elaborating on this dimension of Arendt’s thought, Markell argues that Arendt was not so much against rulership (and for unruliness) but offered a rather idiosyncratic re-interpretation of ruling as such. Ruling is beginning and hence leading, yet no one can lead without the support of others, which makes all “ruling” plural from the outset. This is in part what informs Markell’s more specific interpre-

<sup>26</sup> Arendt (1978, p. 202).

<sup>27</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 205).

<sup>28</sup> Arendt (2006b, p. 151).

<sup>29</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 213).

<sup>30</sup> Markell (2006).

<sup>31</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 164).

<sup>32</sup> Arendt (1998, p. 189).

tation of Arendt's concept of beginning, according to which a beginning should not be understood as a spontaneous and momentary disruption, but rather an "occasion for response" – a moment that allows an "attunement" to an event as something that should be taken as a point of departure and that calls for further responses.<sup>33</sup> Beginning is in this sense about "how to sustain, intensify, and democratize the beginnings with which we are already confronted."<sup>34</sup>

Principles and divided power are, in other words, not only what give rise to action but sustain the very space where action can flourish over the course of time – in theory, this time-space could last for centuries, if only power is arranged correctly and principles kept alive. And though they appear to be limitations residing within action, limiting both the arbitrariness of action and the temptation to drive it toward an external end, they make it possible to sustain the inherent contingency of action, without which freedom cannot be experienced and without which action tends to stagnate and petrify.

It could be added that the sensitivity to sustaining the open-ended horizon of action is also something Arendt demands from those who are not engaging in strictly political activities, such as historians, spectators, or anyone else engaging in judging, assessing, and making sense of our common world. We mentioned earlier that Arendt warned against using the "backward glance of the historian" to reduce the boundless and open horizon of human action to one story with a clear end. In the text we referred to, *Understanding and Politics*, she argues that although historians must be able to tell a coherent story, they must also have an eye for that which might have been otherwise. She thus writes the following:

[Each] event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins. It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected new with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance. He must know that, though this story has a beginning and an end, it occurs within a larger frame, history itself. And history is a story which has many beginnings but no end.<sup>35</sup>

As the citation above moreover implies, agents themselves are in no ways in full control of the manifoldness of this landscape while acting. When we act, we of course *will* things but no will, no matter how strong, can control action in an absolute sense – whence also the notion of power residing in the "I-can" and not in the "I-will," as noted earlier. Between the willed intentions and the actual landscape of human freedom that is beyond our control, there is what Arendt sometimes calls a "hiatus," a leap into the unknown, as it were. This break reveals "an *abyss* of nothingness that opens up before any deed that cannot be accounted for by a reliable chain of cause and effect and is inexplicable in Aristotelian categories of potentiality and

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<sup>33</sup> Markell (2006, p. 10).

<sup>34</sup> Markell (2006, p. 12).

<sup>35</sup> Arendt (2005, p. 320).

actuality.”<sup>36</sup> This indeterminacy, in other words, is precisely what the historian must remain sensitive to, although operating outside the realm of politics and viewing it out of the principles of his own profession; not only should he be able to sort out meaningful events from the chaotic ocean of many simultaneous beginnings but also to respect this chaos itself by resisting the temptation to view history as a *necessary* result of certain causes.

Before moving on to the next section, let us return to the framework of power and principles for a brief summary. In addition to forgiving and making promises, some of the most important mechanisms that sustain action – without resorting to means that are extraneous to politics – operate on the plane of power and principles. These mechanisms are not imposed on politics from the outside but arise somehow naturally from the experience of joint action and allow action to succeed in the undetermined manner that is fundamental to the experience of politics. Importantly, this applies not only to awesome moments that occur relatively rarely during the course of human history, such as the event of revolution. In fact, Arendt suggests that these elements are present and of primary importance even when governors pursue their usual business within the means-end category. When discussing the boundlessness of action in *On Violence*, she adds: "Power, far from being a means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category."<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Arendt was of course not completely insensitive to the fact that politics is rather often about reasoning about appropriate means to achieve certain ends. Rather, her general argument was that no matter how much statesmen may reason in terms of means and ends and no matter how well-crafted our laws may be, the very condition that makes this possible in the first place receives its strength from elsewhere. This is also what Montesquieu understood in her view, that politics is not merely about the laws that govern the relation between the rulers and the ruled, but about the spirit that sets these into motion and sustains the constant movements of the public realm.

#### **4 Generating new possibilities of action – Arendt in the light of Agamben**

Despite the genuinely rich account of how action may sustain itself through different mechanisms that we addressed in the previous section, Arendt’s characterization of politics generally moves in a rather concerned and almost bleak register. Forgiving and making promises are ultimately only partial solutions that attempt the almost impossible (undoing what was done); divided power and principles of action never appear as an explicit framework but remain something to be reconstructed in order to gain insight into how the vulnerable beginnings so important to an Arendtian view might be sustained. In other words, despite the fabric of stabilizers we mentioned, we are still left with a largely gloomy atmosphere in which action appears fragile, transient, and prone to cause damages that we can never fully guard ourselves against;

<sup>36</sup> Arendt (1978, p. 207).

<sup>37</sup> Arendt (1972, p. 150).

the moment action is praised as a source of meaning and exaltation, it soon appears to be in the midst of ruins and impossible to keep alive.

The somewhat paradoxical task of bestowing some degree of permanence to action while also allowing it to be intangible and open-ended is perhaps most clearly in *On Revolution*, as Arendt herself notes in this work. In this section, we approach this paradox by turning to the thought of Giorgio Agamben who has in many ways been influenced by Arendt. The purpose of this engagement is to show that Agamben's work points to a way of increasing the possibilities of political action by bringing an apparent limitation to the center of it and that this move allows us to interpret the paradox identified by Arendt in a more positive key. Importantly, we argue that Arendt's *own* considerations of action's internal stabilizers, addressed in the previous section, seem to support such a more positive interpretation. Before introducing Agamben in more detail, we first discuss the ambiguity in question, which is precisely related to the difficulty of pinning down how action is to be sustained if one wants to escape its apparent opposite of permanence and closure.

As Margaret Canovan also has noted, Arendt makes it clear in her 1963 book *On Revolution* that both the French and American revolutions were not merely about starting something new but about conserving and gaining some degree of permanence to what was newly founded.<sup>38</sup> It is in this spirit that Arendt also contends that the spontaneous council organs that sprang up during the early stages of the French and Russian revolutions were "always organs of action as much as of order."<sup>39</sup> She also discusses Thomas Jefferson's largely forgotten sketches of a ward system and argues that he was engaged in finding a permanent structure that would enable future generations to enjoy the spirit of the revolution – hence his somewhat contradictory evocation of a system of "recurring revolutions."<sup>40</sup> The way in which her own appraisal of founding new things and sustaining the open-endedness of action seems to be cast in a puzzling light by these considerations is particularly pronounced when she notes that the very 'simple' paradox of revolutions seems to be that it can never be only about founding but also about conserving:

The perplexity was very simple and, stated in logical terms, it seemed unsolvable: if foundation was the aim and the end of revolution, then the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring; a lasting institution, embodying this spirit and encouraging it to new achievements, would be self-defeating.<sup>41</sup>

The "perplexity" here of course points to a general problematic that is hard to shake off of her own understanding of political action. If political action is seen in the image of founding, constituting, and the new, it seems threatened from two directions. If exhausted in something permanent, we can no longer speak of action with an "end in itself"; on the other hand, if action founds nothing, it becomes utterly arbitrary and

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<sup>38</sup> Canovan (1997, p. 19).

<sup>39</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 255).

<sup>40</sup> Arendt (2006a, pp. 242–247).

<sup>41</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 224).

replaced with something else. It is this tension between founding and conserving, however “simple,” that persists throughout the book, and as Arendt further clarifies toward the end of it, our political tradition seems to have lost the keys to understanding how action and order, novelty and permanence, could be brought closer to one another: “Perhaps the very fact that these two elements, the concern with stability and the spirit of the new, have become opposites in political thought and terminology [...] must be recognized among the symptoms of our loss.”<sup>42</sup>

To view this paradox from another angle, we now turn to the thought of Giorgio Agamben. We first draw attention to the general landscape of Agamben’s philosophical universe in which the potential character of man and his actions can be argued to be a central pillar. It is from this context that we derive Agamben’s engagement with Aristotle’s discussion of potentiality, which allows us to delineate a central force in the overall approach of Agamben and its relevance for our present purposes. We also take note of a recent critique of the attempt at “going beyond” Arendt’s concept of praxis that Agamben presents in his 2018 book *Karman*.<sup>43</sup> This critique notwithstanding, we demonstrate in the remainder of the text that Agamben’s larger philosophical project provides keys for viewing the indeterminacy of action and the perplexities connected to its sustenance in a decidedly affirmative light.

One of the central characteristics of Agamben’s entire philosophy is his intense affirmation of possibility, potentiality, and contingency. Man is in Agamben’s view essentially workless, taskless, and void of any specific essence; he is not destined to follow this or that destiny and unlike other species, man has the capacity to *not* actualize his possibilities. It is in this vein that Agamben’s inquiries are often accompanied by Aristotle’s writings on potentiality. While we will not rehearse Agamben’s exegesis of Aristotle here in detail, we wish to take onboard his understanding of the relation between potentiality (to and not-to, *dynamis* and *adynamia*) and actuality (*energeia*), as this informs certain “emancipatory” elements in his thought more broadly and remains connected to Arendt’s view of how to sustain action. The core argument of Agamben’s idiosyncratic reading of Aristotle is that impotentiality, or the potentiality not-to, passes into actuality and remains a force working therein. As Agamben sums up in the essay *On Potentiality*, that impotentiality passes into actuality “does not mean that it disappears in actuality; on the contrary, it *preserves itself* as such in actuality.”<sup>44</sup> This procedure clearly implies an instance of liberation; by remaining in actuality, the potentiality not-to liberates a potential of doing otherwise and playing with one’s capacities. It is this logic that functions behind a range of Agamben’s concepts, such as manner, inoperativity, and profanation – we return to these shortly.

Given the overall importance of potentiality and possibility in Agamben’s thought, it is puzzling that Arendt’s evident emphasis on the contingent, frail, and in any case historically rare character of action is wholly absent from Agamben’s most thorough engagement with Arendt’s concept of praxis, as also noted by Sergei Prozorov.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Arendt (2006a, p. 215).

<sup>43</sup> Agamben (2018a).

<sup>44</sup> Agamben (1999a, p. 183, italics in original).

<sup>45</sup> Prozorov (2021).

Crucial to Agamben's critique of Arendt in this book, titled *Karman*, is that the concept of action is first and foremost juridical in origin, implying that action is in the Western tradition always attributed to a culpable subject.<sup>46</sup> Agamben also connects this to Aristotle's notion of a "highest end" toward which all human actions strive and argues that this line of reasoning ultimately leaves humans in a place of debt, guilt, and responsibility, which constant action seeks to overcome: "[Between] human beings and their good there is not a coincidence, but a fracture and a gap, which action – which has its privileged place in politics – seeks incessantly to fill."<sup>47</sup>

Yet, as Prozorov argues, this critique of purposiveness is more directed at Aristotle than Arendt, for whom the notion *eupraxia*, acting well, rather than *eudaimonia* (as the highest end of action) is of primary importance. And as we already noted above, Arendt's understanding of power as potential clearly implies that action is about dwelling in the sheer actuality of power formations rather than forcefully striving toward an end that cannot be attained. In fact, what Agamben appears to be primarily occupied with in *Karman* is, in Prozorov's analysis, to detach his alternative type of action from all juridical connotations, or what Agamben calls "the imputability to a subject." This effort of eliminating any relation to a responsible subject leads him to a completely autonomous sphere of gestures, of which the only thinkable paradigms seem to be the gestures of dance and mime. These are indeed completely innocent, non-responsible, unproductive, and fully immersed in their own potentiality, though as Prozorov argues, it remains a mystery how exactly these serve as meaningful paradigms of political agency. According to Prozorov's final judgement, then, what Agamben's attempt at "going beyond" *praxis* eventually amounts to is a *parody* of Arendt; in place of public appearances in the open-ended horizon of speech and action, we end up with the empty gestures of dancers or commedia dell'arte characters like Pulcinella.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, while one may on good grounds argue that Agamben's gestural model fails in constructing a credible alternative to Arendt's *praxis* that would firmly stand on its own, one need only cast a glance toward another dimension of his engagement with aesthetic practices and his larger conceptual framework to find traces of a more promising attempt of teasing out a force working *within praxis*. Rather than focusing on the mimic gestures that Agamben seeks to elevate to a privileged status in politics in *Karman*, a task that admittedly risks ending in an impasse, we shall here linger a while on his concept of manner.

The notion of manners appears already in Agamben's earlier works.<sup>49</sup> However, it is in his more recent works that he develops the concepts of style and manner to denote an operation or movement specific to what he calls "authentic" artistic creation.<sup>50</sup> Whereas "style" stands for an established or recognizable way of doing art, such as a genre or an epochal style, he conceptualizes the artist's personal touch of engaging with the style as "manner." As Agamben exemplifies through the work and

<sup>46</sup> Agamben (2018a).

<sup>47</sup> Agamben (2018a, p. 63).

<sup>48</sup> See Agamben (2018b).

<sup>49</sup> Agamben (1993).

<sup>50</sup> Agamben (2017; 2019).

performances of renowned painters, pianists, and the like, manner is always something at work within the actualization of a style, an “imperfection within perfection” that allows the artist to imprint the work with a personal mark. This is the power of the artistic creator: His or her true mastery lies not in executing the style exactly as has been deemed correct by the style but in deviating from it while mastering it. It is in this context that Agamben also evokes, once again, his reading of Aristotle’s potentiality that we mentioned before; the manner at work within a style is like the potentiality not-to that passes into actuality as such.<sup>51</sup> Importantly, we are not dealing here with a completely autonomous gesture of artistic creation in the sense that Agamben appears to imply in *Karman*; on the contrary, manner is a force *within* style and remains completely unintelligible in separation from it.

As will be familiar to Agamben’s readers, the logic that underpins the interplay between style and manner belongs to one of the best-known strategies in Agamben’s entire thought, one that consists in liberating conventional or fixed orderings of human activities to a different use. A similar kind of logic can be found in what he has developed under the concepts of *inoperativity* and *profanation*. While we shall not offer a thorough exposition of these concepts here, we wish to distill the central movement that these concepts capture, namely the activation of a possibility to do otherwise by means of including in an activity its own deactivation or suspension. For instance, if the “normal,” denotative function of language is rendered inoperative, it remains in use though not in order to transmit a content or produce meanings. In its inoperative mode, language may be experienced as such.<sup>52</sup> Or, it can be used in ways that are beyond denotation, such as in the case of glorification, praise, and poetry.<sup>53</sup> In the case of profanation, in turn, to profane also points to liberating activities to a new and alternative use.<sup>54</sup> That which is deemed “sacred” is what is locked, fixed, captured, and placed in a separate sphere that is unavailable to free use; by implication, capitalism bears the mark of “sacredness” insofar as the body, language, sexuality, and a range of other human activities are captured in the form of commodities that can only be consumed as products but never freely used. What Agamben’s examples bring forth here – children playing with sacred objects, cats playing with balls – is that there is an alternative, free, playful use available when a specific function is suspended or withdrawn from an object. To profane is to deactivate the sacred, to liberate in it a possibility of doing otherwise.

It is worth noting that despite their apparent subject matter, such as art or religion, the above-mentioned concepts are also central to Agamben’s political thought. As Catherine Mills has rightly argued, Agamben’s work comprises a “densely interconnected conceptual web.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, any attempt to understand his idea of politics unavoidably leads to a range of different conceptual innovations and the concepts developed here are immediately relevant to Agamben’s understanding of specifically

<sup>51</sup> Agamben (2019, pp. 17–19).

<sup>52</sup> See e.g., Agamben (2011a).

<sup>53</sup> Agamben (2011b, Chap. 8).

<sup>54</sup> Agamben (2007).

<sup>55</sup> Mills (2008, p. 2).



*political* liberation. To act politically is to extract the modalities of free and alternative use that have been captured in various apparatuses of tradition.

To be precise, there appears to be two ways in which deactivation, the inclusion of “impotentiality” within a human activity works for Agamben. On the one hand, this allows humans to experience their potentiality as such; on the other hand, a different or alternative use emerges or becomes possible from this very space of potentiality. How these two dimensions are accentuated appears to be determined by the context and discussed examples. At times he emphasizes the experience of dwelling in the mode of potentiality as such, for instance when experiencing the “pure communicability of language” in the suspension of denotation; at other instances, he describes how this potentiality remains at one’s disposal in a manner that permits one to do otherwise. We have discussed artistic configurations as examples of the latter above, but it is worth noting that Agamben understands mannerism as applicable in other contexts as well. As he notes in the 1996 book *The End of the Poem*, “perhaps in every field,” there is a manner that takes its distance from style.<sup>56</sup> In this sense, manner can of course be understood as the inevitable displacement that is always part of a personal application of a convention, rule, or norm. But what is decisive for Agamben is that even a substantial alteration or transformation of any given convention does not overcome or replace the convention; it simply puts it to a new use, transforms it while dwelling in it.

For our present purposes, we focus on Agamben’s emphasis on how a certain deactivation generates alternative ways of acting. But before finally offering our interpretation of how this dimension helps view Arendt in a more positive light, it is crucial to underscore that when Agamben speaks of and apparent negativity, such as “impotentiality within actuality,” “rendering something inoperative,” or “imperfection within perfection,” this by no means points to actual deficiency, inability, or failure. On the contrary, this points to possibilities of action not being exhausted by any particular activity, no matter how established the use of this activity or capacity may be. As Agamben eloquently puts it in *Nudities*, the act of rendering something to a state of potentiality becomes the “open-sesame” that grants the generation of new uses.<sup>57</sup>

Let us now return to Arendt’s “paradox” of founding discussed above. Rather than mourning the difficulty of reconciling founding and novelty with a group of concepts that appear oppositional, such as conservation, permanence, and order, Agamben’s strategy suggests that it is indeed possible to understand these oppositional aspects as part of *praxis* as such. That is, by attaching to itself aspects that appear to be its other, *praxis* both retains its inherent transience and allows for new actions and beginnings to materialize. This is the new, alternative use of *praxis* that emerges from a certain deactivation its basic characteristics – the possibility to mobilize new enterprises by virtue of an apparent impurity that passes into it. This is, in the end, precisely how principles and power division operate in Arendt’s own understanding, as we showed above. They steer action toward some degree of orientation and continuity without this meaning a conversion to permanence and stagnation. Thus, if action is to sustain

<sup>56</sup> Agamben (1999b, p. 98).

<sup>57</sup> Agamben (2011c, p. 100).



itself without transforming into something else or vanishing into thin air, it must allow a different use of it; it must incorporate some aspects of stability while also not sacrificing itself completely.

It can of course be debated whether the remark that political action always includes its own impurity is a radically new remark; that all human activities include a certain mark of alterity is also an important dimension in the work of Jacques Derrida whom Agamben has both been influenced by and taken distance to. And more generally, it seems probable that anyone engaged in the traditional arenas of politics today might recognize something familiar in this condition irrespective of any theoretical considerations or historical examples of revolutions; politics is never merely about new enterprises that start and interrupt but actions that respond to and give rise to a series of other interconnected acts. Nevertheless, Agamben's approach permits us to view the "perplexity" of founding that seems to haunt Arendt's analysis of revolutions in a decidedly less contradictory light precisely because it makes room for "alternative uses," that is, aspects that are not easily subsumed under Arendt's firm affirmation of pure *praxis*. For despite Arendt's own implications toward action's internal stabilizers, the paradox still remains unresolved in her account. On the other hand, this also suggests that Agamben's own political thought might be at least partly cured of the much-discussed obscurity and passivity that some commentators have criticized. Behind and beyond his eclectic collection of examples that deal with deactivation, suspensions, and impotentiality, there remains a rather sober remark about how such apparent privations are generative of new possibilities of action.

More generally, our attempt at understanding Arendt's view on how action sustains itself from within might also shed new light on certain attempts to tease out tensions between democratic and elitist, left and right, revolutionary and conservative dimensions that have made Arendt's thought so famously difficult to categorize. Many of these reflections are undoubtedly supported by Arendt's work, and the task of the present study is not to confront these as such or examine them in detail. However, these critiques have perhaps in part contributed to a certain degree of inattentiveness to Arendt's account of how action is sustained, or sustains itself, given that it is sharply distinguished from the processes of work and labor. As we have argued here, Arendt's understanding of power and principles of action summon into view a seemingly nuanced account of how action sustains and augments itself on the plane of action itself. Seen against this background, the continuous drive toward affirming both radically free action and a certain thrust toward moderation are not perhaps best understood through identifying certain "conservative" and "radical" elements in Arendt's thought.<sup>58</sup> Rather, these amount to an explication of how action is sustained internally given its fragility. In other words, the ambivalence is part of her concept of action as such and points to the manner in which politics is sustained by a certain self-suspension.

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<sup>58</sup> See e.g., Canovan (1978; 1997).

## 5 Concluding remarks

We began this article by outlining the contours of Arendt's conception of political action, treating her as an exemplary figure in the strand of political thought that emphasizes the indeterminate and open-ended nature of political action. We then explored how this frail nature of action might be sustained by elements and mechanisms that arise out of the domain of the political; to this end, we addressed Arendt's understanding of the faculties of forgiving and making promises and focused in more detail on power and principles of action. As we have attempted to demonstrate, the latter two may be understood as limitations internal to political action. Power is in Arendt's view always divided and it is in this divided and limited sense liable to generate more power and more possibilities of action. Principles, on the other hand, the importance of which only recent literature on Arendt has identified, also orient action by limiting both its arbitrariness and the drive toward external ends. Finally, we showed that Giorgio Agamben's larger philosophical project may be mobilized to bring out the predominantly positive aspects of Arendt's account of politics. While the general atmosphere in Arendt's characterization of politics is often rather negative, the emphasis being on the difficulties and paradoxes involved in maintaining political action without falling for the illness of closure of permanence, Agamben's approach allows for a more affirmative view on this condition. *Praxis* indeed includes certain oppositional aspects – hence its impurity – but this is precisely what generates more actions and sustains it without sacrificing its open-ended nature.

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