Loneliness and Appearance: Toward a Concept of Ontological Agency
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Abstract:
In this paper, I posit loneliness, as Hannah Arendt defines it in the final chapters of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as the conceptual opposite of agency. I give a brief overview of Arendt's phenomenology of loneliness, which is the total loss of the common world—the state in which one is incapable of being an interlocutor, through thought, speech or action, with others and, ultimately, incapable of appearing as an individual to others. Though loneliness is realized in its most extreme form in the concentration camps, it is a problem that haunts all human interaction. It is often very difficult, especially for marginalized and traumatized subjects, to give an account of themselves; indeed, to make any sense of their lives at all. I argue that this difficulty is not insurmountable and make the claim that *ontological agency*, understood as the appearance as oneself to others in the world (the exercise of self-disclosure), is an irreducible and constant capacity of every individual, no matter how deeply silenced or oppressed she may have been. I argue, further, that ontological agency is a precondition for meaningful political agency, understood as the public articulation of a well-formed opinion or judgment.

In her recent work on the tendency in political theory to put forth an ontologically 'weightless'

critique, Lois McNay poses an incisive question: 'where does counter-hegemonic agency come from

in the first place?' (McNay, 2014, p. 91). In other words, how can political theory assume the agent's

capacity for political action without examining the ontological conditions that make action possible?

Agonistic theorists of political agency tend not to address this question because they are, rightly,

concerned to keep the political sphere free of normative commitments (Honig 1995, Rancière 1999,

Laclau 1996, Mouffe 2013, Butler and Athanasiou 2013). Agency, so the agonistic story goes, arises

in and through political action rather than out of the implementation of rules for political

conversation agreed upon advance. Equal access to action among human beings, however

oppressed, gives the agonistic view its emancipatory force: political agency is what allows individuals

to resist domination or to reveal the flaws in hegemonic logic. But such political action *always* occurs

against the backdrop of a complex social world, in which some are more disposed to political action than others. And so, we are left with the question: what makes agency possible?

In this paper, I put forward an approach to this question that neither reduces action to pure politics nor reifies political norms by offering a negative definition of agency—by asking: what might it mean to *lack* agency completely? I argue that the absence of agency is the condition of loneliness. I will define loneliness, after Hannah Arendt, as non-appearance before others. If loneliness is the failure to appear as a self[1] in the world, then it follows that we can conceive of appearance in the world as a kind of agency. I call this sustained appearance in the world *ontological agency.* To help unpack this concept of ontological agency, I turn to Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which has enjoyed an increased readership both within and outside of political theory as populist movements have gained traction across Western liberal democracies. Much has been said about the importance of this text for thinking through the ways *political* agency is compromised under totalitarian regimes. However, it seems to me that Arendt's concluding remarks on loneliness add an ontological dimension to her conception of political action; in them she gestures toward the extra-political (or at least not wholly political) condition for political action in a plurality: the "elementary confidence" that one will appear in the world in the first place (Arendt, 1976, p. 477).

The world in which the agent appears is what we build between ourselves and hold in common through action. It is made up of laws, institutions, imaginaries and norms (and, crucially, of the conversations we are always having about these things). The ontological agent exercises her agency by appearing in the world as a unique self. The political agent exercises her agency when she gives an account of her discrete, particular judgment as part of a worldly conversation. Of course, it is impossible to so neatly separate the ontological and political registers of agency: they are coeval and co-dependent. Both depend on the worldly coexistence of plurality and uniqueness. Both political and ontological agency depend, in other words, on a conception of the singular agent in

conversation with a plurality of other agents, each of them also unique. As we shall see, the sustained appearance in the world as a self is surely dependent on a number of political factors including, in Arendt's account, the widespread destruction of juridical and moral norms in Nazi Germany and, also, in any account of politics, the systematically unequal distribution of power along the lines of race, gender, class, ability, or any other marker of social and cultural privilege. However, the ontological dimension of agency suggests that no individual, even an individual constituted through and through by relations of power, is reducible to politics.

My task in this paper, then, is to draw out, in a preliminary way, this difficult concept of ontological agency. I first reconstruct Arendt's phenomenology of loneliness, which she defines as the total absence of a world in common. I also canvass Arendt's account of how this eradication of the world (and, ultimately, the individual) came to pass during the rise of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and further argue that the final result of the eradication of the world is the absence of agency. Following Arendt's account of the destruction of the individual by the collapse of the political helps emphasize the interconnectedness of action in the world, on the one hand, and existence in the world as a unique self, on the other. With this connection in mind, I then offer an account of the reconstruction of agency in both the ontological and the political registers through reading an example from feminist philosophy. It is my hope that thinking about ontological agency as the constant condition for any kind of political action will help ground discussions of agency in political theory and will make clear that the political institutions that make up the world we hold in common, including the solidaristic associations of feminism, are reinforced by ontological agency.

Loneliness and Totalitarianism

We find Arendt's brief but compelling thoughts on loneliness in the final chapter of *Origins*, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government".[2] The purpose of the preceding chapters has

been to explain the economic, social, and political conditions that made possible the rise of totalitarianism in the twentieth century in Germany and the Soviet Union. The final chapter is decidedly more phenomenological in tone. Seyla Benhabib draws attention to Arendt's tendency, in these remarks, to conflate phenomenological and political-philosophical approaches to understanding totalitarianism: on the one hand, Arendt uses loneliness to denote the existential state of being without a world; on the other, she insists that action through association serves as a bulwark against loneliness. It is this latter 'capacity to focus on the phenomena of history, sociology, and culture instead of taking flight into metaphysical abstractions' that Benhabib sees as the aspect of Arendt's work on totalitarianism most relevant to contemporary discussions in normative political theory (Benhabib, 2003, p. 69). But it seems to me that Arendt's methodological slippage in this part of her work is precisely what lends her account of loneliness its richness, and what makes it so pertinent to the present discussion of agency. Though this chapter describes the widespread experience of loneliness at a particular cultural and historical moment, it also offers a more expansive insight into both the experience of loneliness and the affect of loneliness on human being. Arendt's account of loneliness is very much concerned with the interdependence of being and doing, of existence and action. She writes, '[f]reedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin, just as freedom as a political reality is identical with a space of movement between men' (Arendt, 1976, p. 473). In other words, ontological agency arises out of the disclosure of uniqueness, but, at the same time, political agency is sustained by the plurality that makes up this space of disclosure.[3]

Loneliness is the destruction of both of these things—the inner capacity to begin and the space of movement between human beings. It is distinct from solitude, in which both kinds of freedom remain intact, and from isolation, in which an individual is able to think freely but is limited in her ability to move through the public sphere. In solitude, one is engaged in an imaginary

dialogue with oneself or with others but is not cut off from them and can rejoin them. The solitary individual is still in conversation with the world, even though she is not physically present in the world. The pleasure of solitude is made possible by a robust political realm, of which the solitary individual feels herself a part; without the potential 'redeeming grace' of companionship, the confirmation of one's identity by others, solitude can slip into loneliness. The capacity to begin new thoughts in solitude depends on the existence of a political space where these new thoughts might be shared and understood.

Isolation, too, is distinct from, but a potential precursor to, loneliness. The condition of isolation arises when the political realm is impoverished; that is, when individuals are no longer invested enough in shared interests and concerns to act in concert. The first aspect of freedom, the inner capacity to think, plan, or make things is intact, but the second aspect, the space of movement between men, is compromised. In isolation, the individual may still enjoy relationships with friends, family, and intimate community. Uprootedness, which is the loss of a sense of feeling at home in the world, is often the cause of isolation. The pariah, for example, exists without the world but often within a community of other pariahs.[4] The isolated individual may also enjoy the pleasures of work (the making of art, for example) without political participation. Isolation becomes loneliness when politically isolated individuals lose the sense that they have something unique to contribute to the world in common; that is, when they feel *superfluous*.

Loneliness is usually a limit condition of human life, one which affects the very old, the infirm, the insane, and others who have lost their connection to a world held in common. Arendt argues, however, that loneliness becomes the norm rather than the exception under totalitarian regimes. Uprootedness and superfluousness are no longer felt only by marginalized members of society but are, instead, endemic. In totalitarianism, loneliness becomes structural. Arendt argues throughout the third part of *Origins* that totalitarianism in power is made possible when the ideology

of a totalitarian movement has supplanted politics. In late modernity, what were formerly plural, politically engaged classes have become apolitical, atomized masses. And these masses, since they are not united "by a consciousness of common interest" (Arendt, 1976, p. 356), are susceptible to the relative comfort that totalitarian consistency can bring. It is beyond the scope of this paper to rehearse Arendt's detailed account of the factors that propel mass society into totalitarian movements and totalitarian movements into power. Nor do I want to argue that Arendt's portrait of totalitarianism in power is a blueprint for understanding life in late capitalist democracies, though there is certainly much to say about the similarities between the political crises of the previous century and those through which we are living today. Rather, I am concerned here with rehearsing her account of the political conditions for structural loneliness, or mass loneliness, which is the hallmark of totalitarianism in power in order to illustrate the connection between the destruction of the public sphere and the eradication of human plurality.

A totalitarian regime is the result of a totalitarian mass movement gaining control of the state. The political institutions of Enlightenment Europe were revealed to be inadequate, Arendt argues, by the increasing political power of the politically apathetic bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the influx of stateless people into Europe after World War I, on the other. A Europe once politically organized into groups of citizens sharing in common class-based interests became a mass of politically disconnected people bewildered by economic and social instability. Totalitarian movements become appealing under these conditions because they offer a simple answer to a complex question. Disillusioned masses adopt the simplified totalitarian ideology to explain the political crisis—the Nazi explanation of natural racial superiority or the Bolshevik explanation of the destined triumph of the working class. And so, the principled, plural public sphere is replaced by the ideology of the movement.

Totalitarianism does away with the public sphere entirely in order to implement a suprahuman law. Totalitarianism 'executes the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right and wrong for individual behaviour' (Arendt, 1976, p. 462). Within a totalitarian regime, there are no longer institutions in place—courts of law, the free press—that allow people to raise publicly problems that inevitably arise out of living together in society. Rather, the intention of a totalitarian government is to dispense with the individual action of men altogether in order to address the demands of a suprahuman ideology, embodied in the Stalinist regime by the concept of History (the convictions of dialectical materialism) and in Hitler's Germany by the concept of Nature (the preservation and perpetuation of the German nation). Adherence to these ideologies necessarily demands dispensing with the everyday laws of man and appealing to a higher Law, which is in motion toward some ultimate end. In this view, *humankind itself* becomes nothing more than an obstacle for the ideology to overcome. As Arendt writes: 'In these ideologies, the term "law" changed its meaning: from expressing the framework of stability within which human actions and motions can take place, it became the expression of the motion itself' (Arendt, 1976, p. 462). 'Law', in a totalitarian regime, seeks to eradicate human action, rather than to enable it.

Because this law of movement is not concerned with unique individual lives, its enforcement in the world takes the form of terror. Under other oppressive regimes, such as tyranny, citizens are punished when they violate the law, which may be increasingly onerous and subject to the dictator's whims but is still the law. Under totalitarianism, however, people innocent of any wrongdoing are punished because of *what* they are. The usual safeguards of positive law, in other words, collapse in a totalitarian society. Men are no longer judged by their deeds, and guilt and innocence cease to be relevant concepts. Terror, then, is the application of suprahuman Law to the whole of a society. The ultimate aim of terror is to transform the discrete members of society into a single unit of mankind*, one from which plurality and individualism have been eradicated*. Within a system of terror,

individual human life becomes arbitrary and meaningless. Each member of society is marked by the higher law as either victim or executioner. These designations are not based on crime and punishment.[5] They are, instead, bestowed by terror itself. Arendt writes:

> Terror as the execution of a law of movement whose ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind, eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the "parts" for the sake of the "whole." The suprahuman force of Nature or History has its own beginning and its own end, so that it can only be hindered by the new beginning and the individual end which the life of each man actually is. (1976, p. 465)

The political non-space of totalitarianism is hostile to the uniqueness represented by each individual, and terror, understood as the principle of absolute motion toward a suprahuman Law, therefore seeks to stamp out plurality. As Benhabib puts it, 'societal atomization; the breakdown of civic, political, cultural associations and the loneliness of atomized masses, prepares them for the reception of authoritarian and totalitarian movements' (Benhabib, 2003, p. 55). On a mass scale, the totalitarian state strives to homogenise the entire population in the service of universally installing the laws of Nature or History. A pure totalitarian regime thus consists of one mass of mankind, within which individual human beings are interchangeable.

In order for such Law to be successfully implemented, the totalitarian regime must destroy not only the structure of positive law and the possibility for meaningful political action, it must also destroy the human capacity for creativity on a more intimate scale. Terror, as a principle, is not enough to guide the behaviour of each individual within a society, and even a regime that has converted the entire public sphere over to the advance of terror has not necessarily eradicated the capacity for free, creative interaction and thought. This tendency toward freedom, which is the notion of natality Arendt goes on to develop in *The Human Condition* in its embryonic form, is present in every human being because it is 'identical with the fact that men are being born and that therefore each of them *is* a new beginning' (Arendt, 1976, p. 466, original emphasis). A totalitarian government must also indoctrinate its subjects into the (il)logic of terror through the dissemination

of its ideology. Totalitarian logic is able to explain 'every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise' (Arendt, 1976, p. 468). Totalitarianism cancels out any possibility to think freely beyond the bounds of its own logic. Arendt writes:

> Totalitarian rulers rely on the compulsion with which we can compel ourselves, for the limited mobilization of people which even they still need; this inner compulsion is the tyranny of logicality against which nothing stands but the great capacity of men to start something new. (1973, p. 473)

This tyrannical logic strikes down the birth of new ideas within the individual just as the tyranny of terror acts in opposition to the birth of unique individuals into the streamlined society of Law. Adherence to the single premise of an ideology, within a totalitarian regime, becomes a subject's everyday reality. Each subject is force-fed, through indoctrination in the form of institutionalised education and propaganda, the foundational idea (the idea of class struggle in the case of Soviet Russia and the idea of racial supremacy in the case of Nazi Germany) and ever-after the consistent system of logic that grows out of this one accepted idea is enforced upon the indoctrinated subject.

For, once one has accepted the original premise of an ideology, to deny its 'logical outcome' is to contradict oneself and, by extension, to contradict the movement. This totalitarian logic cancels out freedom of thought:

> As terror is needed lest with the birth of each new human being a new beginning arise and raise its voice in the world, so the self-coercive force of logicality is mobilized lest anybody ever start thinking—which as the freest and purest of all human activities is the very opposite of the composite process of deduction. (1976, p. 473)

And once inner freedom has been surrendered, the individual becomes one with the movement. Her social reality is that of the movement, and her interaction with others is governed entirely by the shared acceptance of the movement's ultimate premise. Her capacity to create judgments on both a political scale and a moral scale is destroyed. *This* is the heart of loneliness: the destruction of both the political subject and the unique self. The successful propagation of terror robs the individual of her capacity to communicate new meaning through action. Creation, according to Arendt, is very

simply 'the capacity to add something of one's own to the common world' (Arendt, 1976, p. 475).

But under totalitarianism, both the capacity to create something new and the common world in

which a new creation might be recognised have been destroyed.

The concentration camp represents, for Arendt, structural loneliness in its most extreme and

purest form. In the camp, neither birth nor death mean anything. Both victims and executioners are

part of the same closed system that does not and cannot constitute a common world; they might as

well not exist. They are outside of law, outside of morality—in short, outside of the human

experience altogether. Most appallingly though, the living dead in the camp *see themselves* as

completely unnecessary for Nature's inexorable advance:

> We may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have
> become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own
> superfluousness as much as in that of all others, and the totalitarian murderers themselves
> are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they are alive or dead, if they ever
> lived or never were born. (1976, p. 459)

The 'radical evil' here is the lack of distinction between one individual and the next, the state in

which human uniqueness is no longer of any consequence. Thus, in the political sphere, in the

private sphere, and within the individual herself, loneliness has the same target: *agency*. Arendt's

portrait of totalitarianism in power reveals the extent to which it is this very capacity that makes us

human. Totalitarianism, in trying to rob humanity of its creative potential, is doomed to fail; for

basic human agency, which is itself guaranteed by the birth of new individuals into the world, cannot

be expunged. 'This beginning,' Arendt writes in her final lines, 'is guaranteed by each new birth; it is

indeed every man' (Arendt, 1976, p. 479). The camp cannot be a world. It is, as Benhabib points

out, a space where humanity has ceased to be recognisable as human. She writes: 'The destruction

of the individual in concentration camps by methods of torture, terror, and behaviour manipulation

only shows that a humanity that has become worldless, homeless, and superfluous is also wholly

eliminable' (Benbabib, 2003, pp. 66-67). Structural loneliness, which is the internalisation of one's

own superfluousness, was temporarily possible in the camps and is a constant threat wherever human beings lose their common world. But loneliness cannot be a permanent condition because *it is impossible to eradicate human agency permanently.*

Ontological Agency: Agency as Appearance

Arendt's account of totalitarianism in power catalogues the impoverishment of the world held in common as juridical norms are replaced with the ideology of the mass movement, as moral conviction becomes aligned with that movement in power, and, finally, as individual uniqueness is wiped out in the closed loop of the camp. Her step-by-step analysis of the destruction of the public sphere makes plain the correlation between the lack of agency and the experience of loneliness. The more the ideologies of totalitarian movements replace thinking and acting in political life, the more common the tendency to internalize one's own superfluousness becomes. Structural loneliness does not describe life in pluralistic, non-totalitarian societies, and yet it has some resonance, surely, in a political climate marked by mass alienation, uprootedness, systematic subordination, and a widespread sense of superfluousness.[6] Arendt's account of structural loneliness gives us a picture of the condition of loneliness at its most extreme, its most widespread. This, in turn, allows us to recognize it in daily life. Even in a world with a robust public sphere, loneliness is a possible result of depression, homelessness, social marginalisation, displacement, extreme pain, illness, and the inability to overcome past trauma.[7] And wherever the public sphere is impoverished, wherever appearance is compromised by these marginal states, loneliness threatens to spread.

Arendt certainly saw loneliness as a ubiquitously imminent threat to plurality, but she also insisted upon beginning as a constant capacity. Natality is 'the miracle that saves the world' because it staves off this threat (Arendt, 1958, p. 247). By the capacity to create something new to others, we keep the world intact. The public space facilitated by plurality is made up of conversation and

connection between distinct but interdependent individual agents. Disclosure of an individual's uniqueness in the public sphere, in turn, is a result of what Arendt calls an individual's *whoness*. Whoness is not just difference or otherness; it is the distinction of each human being from every other human being who is, was, or ever will be.

This distinction is revealed when humans speak or act, but it is not a product of intention or planned performance. The urge to appear in the world before others is constant: 'it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human' (Arendt, 1958, p. 176). Peg Birmingham (2007) points out that there are two distinct principles of natality, or the initiative to appear before others: givenness and publicness. The former refers to the unchangeable uniqueness of the individual human being. The latter refers to the appearance of that uniqueness before the world. And so, natality implies both the ineradicable nature of *whoness* and the individual's capacity for spontaneous action. Like Birmingham, I am interested in Arendt's insistence that action is an indispensable element of human being but not one that determines human nature (Birmingham 2007: 766). Thinking about agency as appearance depends upon thinking about uniqueness as a fact of human being, guaranteed by each human being's birth. Crucially, the salience of this uniqueness depends on others. The unique self is intersubjectively constructed in and through relationships with others.[8] Agency, then, is not the capacity to align action and intention; it is, rather, the constant capacity to appear as a unique self in the world, though the specific actions arising out of this appearance are completely unpredictable.

It is easy enough to be certain of this capacity in an abstract way—to endorse the thesis that agency is *grounded* in the ontological fact of birth. It is much more alarming to realise that there is nothing at all, apart from our initiative to appear before others who see us, that guarantees us a place in the world. Such appearance is difficult: recognition is fragile, and successful communication is rare. Dread, melancholia, alienation, misunderstanding, apathy, physical pain, grief—all of these

things tempt us to resist the initiative to participate in the common world and to surrender to loneliness.[9] Even for those who participate in the world with ease, who are surrounded by friends, who are involved in ongoing discussions about worldly concerns, loneliness is an ever-present threat.[10] Appearance, or the exercise of ontological agency, in the face of loneliness is the result of a self's disclosure of her individuality just when that individuality seems particularly tenuous. Indeed, I do not want to give the impression that ontological agency is a simple solution to the problem of loneliness. It is *always* a difficult prospect when an individual is struggling with incommunicability—attempts at communication during such times are often ugly and are occasionally devastating.

Loneliness is cumulative; it seems to breed more loneliness. Once the world is lost, it is very difficult to get it back. The inability to explain oneself to others feels more and more insurmountable the less frequently we undertake such explanations. Without the feeling that one is listened to and recognised, one is less capable of even attempting to express one's thoughts, feelings, opinions, or judgments. In loneliness one 'loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is *necessary to make experiences at all*' (Arendt, 1976, p. 477, emphasis added). Here is the initiative upon which appearance rests—the 'elementary confidence' that one will be seen, that one *can* be seen.[11] Losing trust in oneself as a thinking partner means losing the ability to be alone in solitude, which amounts to losing the ability to think at all. Extended loneliness does not allow for meaningful thought, which Arendt defines as a process of the thinker in conversation with herself.[12]

Thomas Dumm (2010) sees in Arendt's conception of loneliness as loss of the world what he calls 'the paradox of experience', a concept which he uses to underpin his definition of loneliness as the inability to be 'present in the present moment'. 'Loneliness', Dumm writes, 'is the existential realisation of a strange fantasy—the loss of self, world, experience, and thought' (Dumm, 2010, p. 45). A strange fantasy indeed, for what could consciousness be without these four ontological

categories? Arendt's schematic of action helps us expand Dumm's definition. The condition of

natality allows us to insert ourselves into the world again and again through action. When we act, we

appear in the world as unique individuals. Two things happen simultaneously during this

appearance: one, an *agent* understands that she appears as unique; and two, the *world* experiences the

agent's uniqueness. Being present in the present moment might therefore be understood as

experiencing one's own uniqueness; feeling, in other words, as though one can add something to the

common world. Appearance, then, occurs when the four prerequisites for being—self, world,

experience, and thought—are satisfied. Appearance is, in other words, the exercise of ontological

agency.

Appearance always discloses an agent's uniqueness. It always makes 'patent' the 'latent' self,

to paraphrase the quote of Dante's that Arendt places as an epigraph to her section on action in *The

Human Condition*.[13] This does not mean she is fully transparent to herself or able to control how she

appears to others. Appearance is not a matter of thinking, willing, or judging—those three

operations of the mind with which Arendt is latterly concerned. Appearance is a form of action, but

it is a special kind of action that takes place on the edge of politics, and that enables politics. Arendt,

in her discussion of the ubiquity of natality, sees the initiative toward disclosure of one's unique self

in the space of appearance as irresistible. We can take this to mean that, in a reasonably robust

world, the agent cannot help but disclose her own uniqueness. She gives a lecture to an eager group

of students, she amuses a group of friends over lunch, she is remembered, and recognised, by the

clerk at the corner book shop. In each of these situations, the agent's uniqueness is disclosed as she

acts within, and is recognised by, the world. The students, the friends, and the book clerk each

possess a definite idea of the agent's uniqueness; each has a concept of who she is. Importantly, the

agent also experiences her self as a unique being through each of these interactions. Her appearance

before others reinforces her understanding of herself as an individual in the world. Thus, the agent has exercised her ontological agency, as I put it earlier, simply by *being in the world as a unique individual*.

Now imagine that each of these moments occurs in a slightly impoverished world: the students do not listen, the lunch companions do not appreciate the agent's humour, and the bookstore clerk does not remember her even though she comes into the store often. Repeated lack of appearance erodes the agent's sense of her own uniqueness, and, thus, erodes her agency. The less she is perceived as a self by the world, the less she is able to appear as a self in the world. The associations of a world, which confirm the agent's uniqueness, protect her from loneliness. When an individual's initiative to appear in the world is too often thwarted, she begins to feel less and less sure of her own capacity to appear. Such repeated failures of appearance are the worst part of loneliness, according to Arendt: 'What makes loneliness so unbearable', she writes 'is the loss of one's own self which can be realised in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals' (Arendt, 1976, p. 477). Without confirmation of one's uniqueness, of 'one's own self which can be realised in solitude', an individual loses the capacity—perhaps we ought to say the confidence—to articulate what he or she thinks and feels. In other words, communicability becomes impossible when ontological agency is compromised.

Ontological agency can be compromised in a number of ways, ranging from the mundane (the alienation of a factory-like work environment) to the extreme (the total worldlessness of the refugee). An example from feminist philosophy will help clarify what this destruction looks like. In her influential book on selfhood and sexual violence, Susan Brison (2002) writes of the extreme difficulty of communicating at all in the wake of being sexually assaulted. She talks about the feeling (common among trauma survivors) that she died during the assault and has been living a life after death ever since. The result of trauma is, very literally, a death of the self. The basic capacity of appearing as a self before others is lost as a result of trauma. The utterance of the 'I' is meaningful

to no one because the 'I' has been convinced of her or his own superfluousness and others are unable to see her as her 'old self', as the self they had previously known. A survivor of trauma, in other words, is often plunged into loneliness. Brison writes:

> The relational nature of the self is also revealed by a further obstacle confronting trauma survivors attempting to reconstruct coherent narratives: the difficulty of regaining one's voice, one's subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or, worse, made into someone else's speech, an instrument of another's agency. Those entering Nazi concentration camps had the speech of their captors literally inscribed on their bodies. (2002, p. 55)

Loneliness, here as in Arendt, is the result of being made into a merely human object—whether the object of the suprahuman law of totalitarianism or the object of the violence of a single other person. If basic agency consists of being able to make sense of oneself as a unique 'I', loneliness is the condition in which the self cannot say 'I'.[14]

Throughout, Brison describes the experience of feeling her own superfluousness using this language of life beyond death, beginning with her examination by two doctors shortly after the assault: 'For about an hour the two of them went over me like a piece of meat, calling out measurements of bruises and other assessments of damage, as if they were performing an autopsy. This was just the first of many incidents in which I felt as if I was experiencing things posthumously' (Brison, 2002, p. 8). Here is a very powerful picture of non-appearance in loneliness. The self is totally eradicated by the event of the sexual assault and seems, even to herself, to be a manifestation of that event. Rape is world destroying both because it eradicates the victim's sense of self (because she has been 'reduced to an instrument of another's agency') *and* sets her at odds with the world (because we lack the shared linguistic and emotional resources to communicate about rape). 'Unlike survivors of wars or earthquakes, who inhabit a common shattered world', Brison writes, 'rape victims face the cataclysmic destruction of their world alone, surrounded by people who find it hard to understand what's so distressing' (Brison, 2002, p. 15). Because the experience of rape is often incommunicable, the self is unsure of her own capacity to appear as a self in the wake of the

destruction wrought by the rapist and the self is unable to appear in the world. The result of this double difficulty was, for Brison, a deep and unrelenting loneliness. She describes this loneliness: 'In my case, each time someone failed to respond I felt as though I were alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or worse, they heard me, but refused to help' (Brison, 2002, p. 16). The sense of being closer to death than life prevailed for as long as Brison felt unable to re-enter the world. Quite often, when reading her book, one gets the feeling that Brison is writing herself back to life.

Coming back to life, like massaging the blood back into foot that has fallen asleep, is painful. Adriana Cavarero (2015) also emphasises the necessity of appearance understood as ontological agency for understanding the possibility of political agency. She speaks of the 'redemptive power' of narrative, which saves human lives from disappearance (Cavarero, 2015, p. 4). The ontological category of uniqueness carries with it the ineradicability of the individual self. The self, in other words, is redeemed from the meaninglessness (the internalisation of her own superfluousness) by appearance as an individual self to others. Cavarero, then, also reads Arendt as chiefly concerned with the extra-political, or ontological, register of agency. She insists, further, that appearance is something we cannot resist, even thought we might want to resist it. We are drawn out of even the deepest loneliness by the irresistible initiative to appear as selves.

But appearance as a self may cause more pain than one can bear—instead of massaging the blood back into one's extremities, one might reopen a wound that will not stop bleeding. Cavarero writes of this inescapable, and dangerous, desire through an exploration of the work of W.G. Sebald. She finds in Sebald many eloquent examples of the difficulties that plague a self who attempts to re-enter the world. She writes of Sebald's characters in *The Emigrants*—each of whom has survived the Holocaust, has lived in loneliness, has come out of loneliness through appearance, and has committed suicide because he is unable to bear the pain of re-entering the world—by lifting himself

out of loneliness through narration. Unlike Brison, who manages to regain her capacity for

contributing to the common world, these characters are thwarted at the edge of that world. Sebald's

work shows us that people can be (and certainly many people are) destroyed by loneliness. These

people only *seem* to be alive, but they have lost their capacity to see their own action as meaningful.

Thus, they seem themselves to the world, but they have lost their own sense that they are selves.

When appearance does not reveal the individual's uniqueness to *both* the self *and* the world, it is not

ontological agency.[15]

For Brison, attempts to restore her sense of self, to exercise her ontological agency, failed

repeatedly in the aftermath of the assault. Writing herself back to life is something she has been able

to do *because* she has found ways to appear, over time, to others as a unique moral agent capable of

meaning creation. The continuous exercise of ontological agency is necessary for an individual to

gain the kind of confidence necessary to support her convictions and judgments; for her to feel

strong enough, in other words, to exercise her political agency.

Political Agency: Preserving the World of Action

If ontological agency redeems the agent from loneliness, then political agency protects the world

against the spread of loneliness.[16] Political agency, which is the capacity to articulate one's thoughts,

opinions and judgments in public, is impossible in loneliness.[17] As we have seen, this notion of

agency does not rest on a static or unified vision of identity. Each of us has multiple identities

which are subject to constant revision but which are, at the same time, marked by individual

uniqueness. Individuals in association with one another are able to enrich their communicative

horizons through repeated mutually recognitive conversation. In other words, we are able, through

talking to one another, to shore up our agency through strengthening the world.

Political agency and ontological agency are interdependent. The continued exercise of ontological agency, or appearance in the world as a unique individual, *makes political agency possible*. In other words, we risk voicing a judgment in public, whether this entails justifying an opinion on office politics in a meeting between colleagues or giving a speech at a 'take back the night' rally, because we have a sense of ontological agency. Without this basic confidence in our own capacity to appear to others as unique individuals, we are subject to loneliness—we do not get the confirmation of uniqueness which keeps us from feeling superfluous. The exercise of political agency involves risking incommunicability, and this is a big risk when misrecognition can so easily plunge an individual back into loneliness. Friendship, love, support groups and other intimate forms of recognition provide the confidence necessary for political agency, which consists in the articulation of a judgment to others who may or may not understand it. The more this risk is taken, and is successful, the more the agent is able to experience political solidarity. Agents who share, communicatively, a set of judgments and concerns, are able to organise around those concerns and act in concert.[18] This communicative access to action in concert is the hallmark of a robust world.

We confirm our agency through appearing to others in everyday ways, through attempting to articulate our judgments in private conversation, say, or through interrogating the boundaries of what is communicable to people who recognise us in our *whoness* and who care for us. Susan Brison, whose work helps illustrate the mutually reinforcing relationship of ontological and political agency, writes of confirming her own agency through therapy, through conversations with friends, and through the support of her partner. These supportive relationships facilitate political agency by providing a world in which the agent can be certain she will appear as herself. Brison spends quite a bit of time writing about the difficult process of relationship building and supportive conversation that allowed her to write her book in the first place, to identify publicly as a rape survivor, and to carry out her work as a feminist philosopher and a feminist activist. She distinguishes between

'living to tell' about the assault, by which she means being able to give an account of it to others, and 'telling to live', by which she means coming up with a way to make sense of the assault to herself in order that at she may regain the world and her relationship to the world. Before she was able to make political judgments as a rape survivor and an activist, she had to practice being an ontological agent by talking to supportive and sympathetic others. Bolstered by the continued appearance as a self before others, Brison began again to have a sense of herself as capable of expressing a variety of interests germane to collective action. Ontological agency, in this way, gives rise to political agency.

The grounding of political agency in ontological agency raises some important concerns about the implications of such a thesis for critiques of injustice in political theory. First, this notion of agency might seem at first glance to rob of political agency those people who need it the most— namely, people who are mired in loneliness. Similarly, the idea that there is something unique in each individual may seem to reinforce liberal conceptions of individual autonomy and, further, to paper over the aspects of structural injustice which condition appearance. It is my contention, despite these potential criticisms, that conceiving of political agency as grounded in ontological agency will support the cultivation of a form of politics that works to ameliorate loneliness.

As has been established, loneliness is the condition in which appearance is impossible. This condition often affects, it is important to remember, the most vulnerable among us, the people, in other words, most in need of political representation, such as the physically disabled, the homeless, and the mentally ill.[19] Arendt's example *par excellence* of the human being confronted time and again with his or her own political invisibility is the refugee. 'The world found nothing sacred', she wrote about the failure to extend universal human rights to refugees on the basis of their humanity alone, 'in the abstract nakedness of being human' (Arendt, 1976, p. 299). Mere existence is not enough, I take her to mean, to guarantee appearance. It is all too common for human beings to ignore suffering and injustice. The condition of loneliness, wherein an individual has 'no place in the

world, recognised and guaranteed by others', is not something that can be corrected by abstract calls for social justice (though the more robust the world, the more concerned it will be with social justice) (Arendt, 1976, p. 475). It is, rather, necessary for the specific individual struggling with the condition of loneliness to appear in the world as a unique individual. Appearance—being recognised as a unique human being—is what allows an individual to make the particular aspects of her situation communicable. Without appearance, the world may perceive the individual in her abstract humanity, as a statistic or a stereotype rather than as complex and unique.

But affirming the necessity of appearance as essential for the elimination of loneliness does not fully address the extent to which appearance itself is structured by and through relations of power. Appearance depends, as we have seen, on the existence of a world, one which by its social and political norms sets what Judith Butler calls a frame of intelligibility (2010). Appearance, then, adjusts itself to this frame. The self-conception of the ontological agent is defined by its terms. A concept of ontological agency must be tempered by this insight, and we must be careful not to imagine that appearance as a unique self in the world is equivalent to anything like self-sovereignty. Appearance requires stepping into the web of discourse, in which there are finite options for intelligibility. It may require conforming to ways of being in the world that are not freely chosen or that are actively oppressive. To appear as gendered, for instance, often means to take on a number of behaviours, self-conceptions, etc. that correspond with belonging to one's gender. And gender, though a political category, is inseparable from being. And yet, each individual retains the permanent capacity to change and challenge this frame, no matter how subjected to its norms and expectations she may be.

Where do these difficulties leave the people who struggle, whether because they exist on the margins of political life or because they have internalized dominant narratives about their own superfluousness, to appear to others? Unless they are included in, and recognised by, some kind of

community, they will lack a sense of ontological agency: and this is precisely the problem at which

our calls for social justice ought to be aimed. Attention to the problem of loneliness might, as Jill

Stauffer (2015) argues, make us aware of a specific form of injustice—that of not hearing the lonely.

The correction of structural inequality and systematic injustice begins with listening to the victims of

inequality and injustice, with perceiving them as unique agents with a number of different stories to

tell.

Arendt's thoughts on loneliness provide a way to think about the ontological conditions for political

action. Being human in the world means appearing before other humans in the world. Agency need

not be understood as self-sovereign action; it may be seen, instead, as a non-sovereign self-

awareness. In ontological agency, this awareness comes in the form of recognising that one appears

as a unique being to others. In political agency, on the other hand, it takes the form of the practical

self-conception that accompanies judgment-making. Political agency may take many different

forms. It may entail the encouragement of difficult conversations about a certain kind of harm, or

taking part in a protest, what Lisa Disch refers to the practice of 'articulating solidarity', which she

sees as the constant re-negotiation of what we have in common as our interests shift:

> Rather than defining what we believe in or declaring who we are, we now need to assess how
> we are implicated in a worldly event. This is the task of articulating solidarity: constructing
> the 'facts' of a contingent situation in a way that makes possible a coordinated response by a
> plurality of actors who—apart from that contingency—may have more differences than
> affinities. (1995, p. 288)

A robust world, in which members are able to appear in action, makes political judgment easier.

When we exercise political agency, we claim our current interests in common and make explicit our

associations. We make clear the reasons behind our convictions, listen to others explain why their

convictions are important to them and attempt to articulate what it is that we have in common.

A world where this kind of give-and-take is possible is the opposite of totalitarianism. Instead of one suprahuman law that erodes the space between citizens, there are negotiable laws that reflect the democratic reality of a plurality of perspectives. The more we articulate our interests in common, the easier it is to articulate our interests in common: political agency, like loneliness, is contagious. The loneliness of the concentration camps and the solidarity of members of a feminist consciousness-raising group are at opposite ends of the agency spectrum. The former is the nadir of agency, and the latter represents its productive political exercise.

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[1] By 'self', I mean the unique confluence of narratives and norms that make up each individual. These norms and narratives are always changing, but the individual's uniqueness is constant. For a full account of this view of selfhood, see Lucas (2018).

[2] Arendt added this chapter, Chapter 13, to her second edition of *Origins* in 1958. As Martin Shuster points out, Arendt's remarks on loneliness, though they arguably form the foundation for Arendt's analytical framework in this enormous study, have rarely been treated in a systematic way.

[3] What Arendt means by the space between men is not always clear, but it certainly needs to be a public space and cannot only consist of private life. Though Arendt argues, in her address on Lessing (1995) and in her work on the pariah (2007), that the space between friends is enriched by the world and that the world is enriched by conversations between friends, the space between friends is not *enough* to constitute a world.

[4] '…the pariahs of this world enjoy the great privilege of being unburdened by care for the world.' (Arendt, 1995, p. 14). Indeed, by 'dark times', Arendt *means* periods of world impoverishment. The exemplary men and women about whom she writes maintain the integrity of their uniqueness, in spite of the isolation brought on by the decline of the political realm.

[5] Arendt gives an interesting example of the collapse of executioner into victim and victim into executioner at the behest of the law of Nature: 'The introduction of purely objective criteria into the selective system of SS troops was Himmler's great organisational invention; he selected the candidates from photographs according to purely racial criteria. Nature itself decided, not only who was to be eliminated, but also who was to be trained as executioner' (1976, p. 468).

[6] The extent to which loneliness is a political problem rather than a limit condition varies from time to time and place to place, but the conditions for mass alienation Arendt treats in *Origins*, the economization of the public sphere, classless societies, increasing nationalism, decreasing opportunities for actual engagement with others, are arguably just as prevalent now as they were sixty years ago. Indeed, in 2018, the UK appointed a minister for loneliness and depression and anxiety are on the rise around the world.

[7] The connections between loneliness and mental illness and loneliness and extreme physical pain have, of course, been explored in a number of ways and are a perennial theme in art and literature. For more some compelling thoughts on the former, see Solomon (2015). For an account of the latter, see Scarry (1985).

[8] For extended accounts of selfhood as relational, see Benhabib (1999), Brison (2002). Allen (2008), and Stauffer (2015), and Kelz (2016).

[9] The desire to give in to loneliness is perhaps close to Sartre's notion of bad faith. It is as fruitless and unsustainable to deny one's own uniqueness in favour of superfluousness as it is to deny one's own freedom in favour of unfreedom.

[10] Many, including Arendt herself, see loneliness, understood as world poverty, as a distinctly *modern* threat. The first complete acknowledgment by human beings of their own superfluousness occurs, for Arendt in the camps. There, for the first time, the distinction between life and death ceases to matter. Giorgio Agamben (1998) has gone so far as to take up this internalised superfluity as the basic condition for contemporary politics. For more on loneliness as a modern condition (and a condition of modernity) see Dumm (2010).

[11] Another way of expressing this insight is to say that being a conversation partner with myself in solitude depends on first knowing how to be a conversation partner in the common world: 'Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience.' (Arendt, 1976, p. 476).

[12] Martin Shuster argues, intriguingly, that the insight that in loneliness thinking becomes impossible is the real payoff of Arendt's chapter on loneliness and totalitarianism.

[13] *For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; since everything that is desires its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows…Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self.* From Dante Alighieri's *De Monarchia*, quoted in Arendt, 1958, p. 175.

[14] Simone Weil also thinks of the power to say 'I' this way: 'We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say "I".' (2002, p. 26).

[15] A story from Sebald which suggests that the shell of a lonely self convinced of its own superfluousness can sometimes seem to the world to be whole: 'At Regensburg he crossed the Danube on his cloak, and there made a broken glass whole again; and, in the house of a wheelwright too mean to spare the kindling, lit a fire with icicles. This story of the burning of the frozen substance of life has, of late, meant much to me, and I wonder now whether inner coldness and desolation may not be the pre-condition for making the world believe, by a kind of fraudulent showmanship, that one's own wretched heart is still aglow.' (1999, p. 86).

[16] Critics of Arendt have argued that there is a lack of resources for resistance against totalitarianism in power and for explaining the exercise of political agency in situations of extreme oppression and domination (Rancière, 2004: Balibar, 2007). In this paper, I investigate possibilities for such resistance through a focus on appearing to others. I acknowledge, however, that Arendt's political theory leaves something to be desired when it comes to imagining political revolt in conditions of structural loneliness. Like other feminist readers of Arendt (Allen, 1999; Nedelsky, 2012), I try to draw out of Arendt resources for imagining agency as relational. Arguably, this means that those resources disappear in deeply authoritarian and totalitarian societies, but I want to suggest that the kind of political energy that would enable collective resistance to such regimes is grounded in a nurturing of personal-political associations of support groups, consciousness-raising groups, feminist friendships, and other solidaristic configurations.

[17] The tendency to be concerned with private affairs rather than public involvement bespeaks the condition of isolation, not loneliness. Arendt points out the increase in this tendency in Europe but also, importantly, as a trenchant problem in America (originally diagnosed by Tocqueville). See Chapter 5 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie". For more on a distinctly American understanding of Arendtian isolation and loneliness, see Richard King (2012).

[18] Action in concert never determines the permanent content of a collective's political needs but concern, rather, 'the practical, ad-hoc organisations of citizens pursuing "actual" and "short-term" goals' and 'disappear[s] as soon as these goals have been achieved.' (Borren, 2013, p. 206).

[19] Who is the most vulnerable among us will vary depending on who "we" are as a particular public. The dominance of some ways of being in public life might render invisible other ways of being. Those who repeatedly fail to appear as selves in the world due to marginalization from or in the public sphere—an elderly person is unable to leave the house, perhaps, or a lesbian woman living in a society where homosexuality is illegal—are much more likely to fall into loneliness. Identifying these patterns of loneliness is important empirical work.

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