

## “Virtue or Will” Two Notions of Freedom in the Concept of Arendtian Politics\*

*Stefanie Rosenmüller*

Yet just as we, despite all theories and isms, still believe that to say ‘Freedom is the *raison d’être* of politics’ is no more than a truism”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

“The meaning of politics is freedom”<sup>2</sup> This is the famous yet somewhat opaque definition of freedom in Hannah Arendt’s fragmentary Introduction into politics. This obviously special relation between politics and freedom will be explored in this article.

Clearly, plenty of difficulties lurk behind the establishment of a clear-cut definition of Arendt’s concept of freedom, since Arendt evolves her concepts in a metaphorical language. Her description of current political phenomena refers to long buried notions that she attempts to resurrect. Frequently, Arendt raises these extinct references by excavating their etymology, often by contrasting them to common ambiguities and misinterpretations that explain this extinction of these archaic concepts. Thus Arendt indirectly ties together political and terminological history; it is for this reason that recent scholarship has rekindled interest in Arendt’s work.

In the essay “What Is Freedom?” (1958) Arendt develops her concept of political freedom as freedom in an exceptional sense. Arendt defines the concept of political freedom mainly by contrasting it to several other notions of freedom - above all, to that of free will, which has played a dominant role in the Christian tradition. The notion of free will has traditionally dominated the understanding of politics, however it has done so by misinterpreting freedom as independence and sovereignty.

To find out what Hannah Arendt’s antipodal concept of political freedom is, I would like to pick up on two threads of contention which were raised in the workshop on “Violence and Politics”<sup>3</sup> in the work of Arendt.

---

\* I am grateful to Alison Borrowman for helping with the translation.

- 1 In: What Is Freedom?, in: Arendt, Hannah: *Between Past and Future; Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, pp. 143 – 171, p. 156 (henceforth: WF). This text is a shortened translation of the German language publication: *Freiheit und Politik* (1958). In the English edition the fifth part of the text is missing. I therefore sometimes refer to the German text, quoted as: Arendt, Hannah: *Freiheit und Politik* (henceforth: FuP) in: *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft* (henceforth: ZVuZ), *Übungen im politischen Denken I*, Piper München 2000<sup>2</sup>; pp. 201 - 226.
- 2 Hannah Arendt: *Introduction into politics*, in: Arendt, Hannah: *The Promise of Politics*, edited by Jerome Kohn, Schocken Books, New York, 2005, p. 108, which is based on the German fragments of Arendt’s *Einführung in die Politik*, edited by Ursula Ludz, titled *Hannah Arendt: Was ist Politik?* Piper, 2003. (henceforth: IP).

## I. Interruption and Initium

1. We can think about Foucault's concept of power as analogous to the Arendtian concept of the machinery of the social<sup>4</sup>. This machinery of the social falls under Arendt's category of labor, one of the three basic forms of activities, 'labor', 'work', and 'action', which she elaborates in *The Human Condition*<sup>5</sup>. Under this analogy we can interpret Arendt's essay *On Violence* (1970)<sup>6</sup> as an attempt to conceptualize political freedom as the capacity to interrupt the automatisms of the category of labor.

In *On Violence* Arendt draws attention to the great temptation to stop or interrupt these automatisms by means of violence. A violent act triggers a new chain of events - but this chain of causes and effects differs greatly, as Arendt points out, from the sequence of events initiated by politically free beginnings that she would call 'action'. Thus Arendt insists on the distinction between two different kinds of interruptions of automatic processes that are easily confounded.

For a definition of the difference between these two types of interruptions, we draw on the two notions of 'beginning' that Arendt introduces in *The Human Condition*, referring to St. Augustine's notions of 'principium' versus 'initium'<sup>7</sup>. A principium - a cause - launches a new beginning for a chain of causes and effects. However, the initium, in Augustine's somewhat enigmatic definition, is related to "the character of human existence in the world"<sup>8</sup>. In Arendt's interpretation this type of beginning differs from the beginning in the sense of 'principium' that refers to God's creation of the world. "Man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence"<sup>9</sup>.

Arendt goes on to provide some hints to understanding the difference between initium and principium. Initium means "the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known."<sup>10</sup>.

---

3 This paper was initiated by a Workshop of Dr. Vlasta Jalusic and PD Dr. Wolfgang Heuer (*Violence And Politics: The Challenges Of Our Time*. Reading Hannah Arendt. Peace Institute/Workers' and Punks' University, Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 17 -27, 2004), as a close reading of WF. The following considerations are continued in my PhD on: *Locating Justice/Der Ort des Rechts bei Hannah Arendt* (Universität Flensburg), forthcoming 2008.

4 I am grateful to Vlasta Jalusic for this hint. For further connections between Foucault and Arendt see e.g. Amy Allen: *Power, Subjectivity and Agency: Between Arendt and Foucault*, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 10 (2), 2002, pp. 131 - 149.

5 See chapters III (labor), IV (work) and V (action) in Arendt, *Hannah: The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1958 (henceforth: HC).

6 Arendt, *Hannah: On Violence*. In: *Crisis of the Republic: Lying in Politics - Civil Disobedience - On Violence - Thoughts on Politics and Revolution*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, pp. 103 - 198 (henceforth: OV).

7 „According to Augustine, the two were so different that he used a different word to indicate the beginning which is man (initium), designating the beginning of the world by principium, which is the standard translation for the first Bible verse. As can be seen from *De civitate Dei* XI 32, the word principium carried for Augustine a much less radical meaning: the beginning of the world does not mean that nothing was made before (for the angels were), whereas he adds explicitly (...) with reference to man that nobody was before him.“, HC, p. 350, note 3.

8 WF, p. 167.

9 WF, p. 167.

10 WF, p. 151.

Arendt adds that according to Augustine the word *principium* carried "a much less radical meaning: the beginning of the world does not mean that nothing was made before (for the angels were), whereas he adds explicitly (...) with reference to man that nobody was before him"<sup>11</sup>.

2. Can we apply this distinction to the distinction between violent acts and free political beginnings?

If we understand violence in the Arendtian sense of a strictly instrumental category<sup>12</sup> we can say that the beginning of a violent act is planned as the first step in a strategy, with which one uses certain means to reach a certain goal or purpose. This interpretation conforms with the category of 'work' in the analysis of activities in Arendt's *The Human Condition*, mentioned above. Being planned, the idea of the goal and perhaps the means to reach it as well are already "known" and "given" in the sense of the Arendtian definition above. However, Arendt suggests that a political beginning need not be planned, but can merely be something not fully known or recognized by the actor himself<sup>13</sup>. This is the first difference between political acting that takes place in the public realm and is related to human beings, and instrumental working that occurs within the world of objects, as Arendt points out in *The Human Condition*. The second difference relates to the consequences. While instrumental activities i.e. 'work' in the terminology of Arendt, have a distinct result and end, 'acting' is unforeseeable in terms of its consequences. In *FuP/WF* Arendt stresses this point when she says that 'action', "seen from the perspective (...) of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatisms it interrupts, is a 'miracle' – that is something which could not be expected"<sup>14</sup>. This is because "from the viewpoint of the processes in the universe and in nature, and their statistically overwhelming probabilities, the coming into being of the earth (...) and (...), the evolution of man, finally out of the processes of organic life are all 'infinite improbabilities', they are 'miracles' in everyday language"<sup>15</sup>.

Now we understand that there are two steps in Arendt's argumentation in *On Violence*. Violent acts are meant to interrupt the social automatisms under the category of labor. But violent acts fall under the category of work. Their beginning may be free but only insofar as they are controlled by the actor as their creator. He decides to put out an impulse to start a chain of causes and effects. The creator chooses one of a given set of possibilities. And thus the violent act interrupts the automatic process only to start a chain or circle of violence that is just as inevitable; one predetermined process of events is transformed into another predetermined chain of events. It follows that the interruption is not a real interruption. This kind of beginning does not free the creator from automatisms; it simply leads to another form of predetermination.

---

<sup>11</sup> Of course this sounds contradictory, if something did already exist before the existence of human beings, then that is, „not nothing“(HC, p. 350, note 3). But the meaning can be understood by noting the distinction between „nothing“ and „nobody“. One could supplement it: Before the existence of mankind there existed something but not somebody. Being somebody corresponds to Arendt's definition of human individuality and describes particularly the attributed faculty to start initiatives. Hence this explanation is not contradictory but only tautological.

<sup>12</sup> See OV.

<sup>13</sup> WF, p. 144.

<sup>14</sup> WF, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> WF, p. 169 f.

But it then follows that the instrumental, i.e., violent beginning, is not even strictly free, in the sense of the indeterminateness that Arendt wants to preserve. "The power to command, to dictate action, is not a matter of freedom but a question of strength or weakness"<sup>16</sup>. In general we can now say that for Arendt the category of cause and effect does not apply in politics and should to be reserved for the sphere of objects<sup>17</sup>.

3. Subsequently Arendt links this thought with a critique of the political concept of sovereignty. There again is a clear analogy to Foucault, who also declines to understand power as a form of justified violence or sovereignty as a political principle<sup>18</sup>. The reason behind this critique may be the same for both, as sovereignty leads to a legitimacy of violence. Arendt, at least, argues that the category of cause and effect always presupposes a sovereignty which is typical for homo faber i.e. man as the working being; not for the actor, man as a political being<sup>19</sup>. For unlike homo faber, man as the political actor is never master and sovereign of his actions<sup>20</sup>. Therefore for Arendt, sovereignty is not a political category and its use in politics has a rotting or spoiling effect<sup>21</sup>. First, in the view of Arendt, the confusion of these two categories causes a misinterpretation of freedom as independence, while dependence on others is then perceived as a constraint. But since politics is the space where people rely on others, freedom becomes something which is to be excluded from the political sphere<sup>22</sup>; freedom means then a freedom "from" politics<sup>23</sup>. This must seem absurd to Arendt, who uses freedom in its antique concept, which framed freedom as a radically political concept<sup>24</sup>: it exists only within the political sphere and hence can succeed or fail only there. But the confusion is not only a problem of theory. According to Arendt it also has a practical effect, because it destroys freedom itself<sup>25</sup>. Sovereignty and freedom are antagonistic concepts<sup>26</sup>: that means, in Arendt's concept, "Non-sovereignty" seems to be the prerequisite for freedom and not vice versa.

Arendt draws the connection between homo faber and sovereignty when she quotes Carl Schmitt: "He recognizes clearly that the root of sovereignty is the will: sovereign is who wills and commands"<sup>27</sup>. One can suggest that the identification of freedom and sovereignty leads, in Arendt's view, to an understanding of politics as a battlefield. "For it

16 WF, p. 152. Note: There appears to be a systematic irregularity here, because strength in Arendt's terms refers to nature and labor, while freedom of the will refers to work. One possible explanation of this lies in the fact that nature was interpreted in a different way during and beyond the renaissance - the dawn of the mechanical age - than it is today. Today, according to Arendt in HC, all the activities have shifted, and to some extent exchanged places so that they no longer fit and have a destructive effect: mankind "acts" in the realm of nature instead of the public realm and causes unpredictable consequences; whereas man understands himself mainly as an animal laborans. In any case, command has nothing to do with freedom.

17 See also (in German): Kultur und Politik, 1958, in: ZVuZ, pp. 277 - 304, p. 294 ff (henceforth: KuP). In English: The Crisis in Culture, in: Between Past and Future, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, pp. 277 - 226.

18 See esp. Chapter 2 in: Foucault, Michel: Society must be defended, New York, Picador, 2003. I am grateful to Bernd Heiter for this reference.

19 In German: "setzt Souveränität voraus, die der Herstellende, aber nie der Handelnde besitzt", KuP, p. 295.

20 In German: „homo faber ist Herr und Meister: der Handelnde ist aber nie Souverän“, KuP, p. 295.

21 "verderblich", FuP, p. 213.

22 FuP, p. 225.

23 Also see Arendt's remarks on „Freiheit von“ in: Revolution und Freiheit, 1953, in: ZVuZ, pp. 305 - 326, p. 241, (henceforth: RuF).

24 See FuP, p. 211.

25 "Fatal consequences", WF, p. 162.

26 „Freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously.“ WF, p. 164.

See also in FuP, p. 214, the reduction of variety to the singular. In Arendt's writings solitude is always an attribute of homo faber and non-freedom.

leads either to a denial of freedom (...) or to the insight that the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic can be purchased only at the price of the freedom, i.e. the sovereignty of all others."<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, Arendt states, "if men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce"<sup>29</sup>. We see now that homo faber as the sovereign of his work is connected with this quotation of Schmitt to the freedom of the will. Arendt defines, with Augustine, freedom of the will as "liberum arbitrium", i.e., "a freedom of choice that arbitrates and decides between two given things, one good and one evil, and whose choice is predetermined by motive which has only to be argued to start its operation"<sup>30</sup>.

Now we have a systematically clear opposition between instrumental work, which is a relationship of violence started by a principium that refers to goals that can be chosen and is thus ruled by motives and a free will and political action with a free beginning in the sense of initium. But the contents of this opposition have still not been illuminated.

What is Arendt's counter-concept? What is freedom in Arendt's concept then, if it is not the freedom of the will? II. Will and Virtue

In WF Arendt does not give a clear cut definition of political freedom, but she does give certain hints within the contrasting systematic of work, labor, and action that can help us to approximate her concept of political freedom.

Arendt states: "Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them."<sup>31</sup> This again is a definition which frames political freedom in opposition to the category of instrumental work. Moreover, this freedom does not seem to be defined by the existence or absence of certain given circumstances but rather in terms of the actor's relationship towards his own motives, i.e., to himself. To follow Arendt's argumentation and to understand the way in which the actor can be "free" from his own motives, let us again draw the parallel to Foucault. In his late thinking Foucault proposes self-care as a proper ethical relationship to oneself<sup>32</sup>. This self-care must therefore be of a different structure than the power of the social, which dominates us. So perhaps we can draw an analogy to Arendt's concept of virtue as a proper ethical relationship to oneself and to others, while she does not call it self-care, but 'self-control'<sup>33</sup>.

---

27 Note No. 5, p. 40, in FuP-2, i.e.: Freedom and Politics: a Lecture, in: Chicago Review 14, Heft 1 Spring 1960, p. 28 - 46, quoted by the editor Ursula Ludz of ZVuZ on p. 411. But sovereignty and violence might be an adequate concept for the sphere of law, especially for constitutional law; see Arendt's remarks on Montesquieu in FuP, p. 215 and the end of this article.

28 WF, p. 164.

29 WF, p. 165.

30 WF, p. 151.

31 WF, p. 151.

32 See Foucault, Michel: L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté, in: Concordia. Revista internacional de filosofía, No. 6, 1984, pp. 99 - 116.

33 WF, p. 159, "Selbstbeherrschung" in FuP, p. 212.

## 1. How does Arendt describe virtue?

In WF Arendt explains her notion of the freedom that is inherent in political acting by recalling Machiavelli's concept of 'virtu', which in her words is: "the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortuna"<sup>34</sup>. Arendt then provides three characteristics which are connected with one's relations to others: virtue is a kind of "virtuosity", that is, an "excellence"<sup>35</sup>, it needs an audience as "a space where freedom can appear"<sup>36</sup>, and it needs "courage"<sup>37</sup>. Due to the similarities that political "virtuosity" may have with creative arts<sup>38</sup>, Arendt now has to define these aspects in their specifically political sense. Courage is political, Arendt argues, in so far that one is not occupied with matters of individual survival and providing for oneself but has to confront considerations of public interest. "Courage is indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake"<sup>39</sup>. That implies the ability to direct one's interest to public matters and calls for the courage to disengage from the cares of daily survival and perhaps even to risk life itself<sup>40</sup> - this at least is a clear analogy to Foucault's attempt to conceptualize individual courage as the quality required to take the risk of adhering to an opinion that deviates from that of a despot<sup>41</sup>. Arendt might also be hinting that in politics it takes courage to confront the public's judgment of our deeds and speeches.

Arendt's specific definition of the political, which separates surviving, i.e., in her terms, social questions, off from political matters, is highly controversial<sup>42</sup>, at least in its relevance and applicability for modern times. We can concede, though, that two focuses can be discerned: the focus on public and communicative matters and that on matters of survival.

Thus virtue which Arendt herself compares with the Aristotelian notion of ethical virtue, the *areté*<sup>43</sup>, is a habitus that, in terms of its relation to others, is again in juxtaposition to instrumental relationships and to relations of the social, of nature and the category of labor. Unlike labor and nature-related activities, virtue requires a public space and has its goal within the performance, not in the result, as it is the case with work and the instrumental or cultural activities of *techné* and *poiesis*. I have already mentioned above the difference between the actor's initiative in action and *homo faber's* beginning of a work and alluded to the difference in the activities' focus. With regard to the sense of freedom, we can now sum up in terms of what is absent, i.e., as a negative freedom, freedom from cares of survival and freedom from criteria of utility.

---

34 WF, p. 153.

35 "An excellence, we attribute to the performing arts, as distinguished from the creative arts of making, where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself", WF, p. 153.

36 WF, p. 154.

37 WF, p. 156,

38 Both politics and culture, which in Arendt's diction is identical with art, share the public realm. See KuP, part II.

39 WF, p. 156. See also: "For politics, according to the same philosophy must be concerned almost exclusively with the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of its interests", WF, p. 155.

40 See IP, p. 122.

41 See Foucault, Michel: *Fearless Speech*, New York, Semiotext(e) 2001. I am grateful to Bernd Heiter for this reference.

42 See e.g. Bernstein, Richard: *Rethinking the Social and the Political in: Philosophical Profiles*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp 238 - 259.

43 „Areté" in FuP, p. 206, only implicit in WF, p. 153.

Now let us see whether we can consider this difference as a difference in the relation of man towards himself.

2. This excellence mentioned above is the 'telos' that can be fulfilled in political action.

The way this type of telos leads the political action, shows us what sort of freedom is at issue<sup>44</sup>. To distinguish it from purposes and motives, Arendt calls it "a principle"<sup>45</sup>.

Although this term sounds similar to the Augustinian term of "principium" mentioned above, there is no similarity in the notions themselves<sup>46</sup>. Some elements can be found to help us to characterize this type of principle as a telos. Arendt describes it in the central passage:

"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 once the act has been started. For, unlike the judgment of the intellect, which precedes action, and unlike the command of the will which initiates it, the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself, yet while the merits of judgments lose their validity, and the strength of the commanding will exhausts itself, in the course of the act which they execute in cooperation, the principle which inspired it loses nothing in strength or validity through execution. In distinction from its goal, the principle of an action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular person or to any particular group. (...) Such principles are honor or glory, love of equality, which Montesquieu called virtue, or distinction or excellence (...) but also fear or distrust or hatred. Freedom or its opposite appears in the world whenever such principles are actualized; the appearance of freedom, like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act. Men are free - as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom - as long as they act, neither before nor after, for to be free and to act are the same."<sup>47</sup>

The differentiation between this telos, as a principle which liberates from survival, and utilitarian aspects leads us to the conclusion that these are activities that need not be carried out in opposition to others. Whereas firstly work is led by an idea, strictly governed by motives, and leads, at least in general, to predictable consequences, action, in the sense of the *areté*, is, as Arendt says, "inspired" but not "prescribed" by the principle<sup>48</sup>. This lends a quality of an open future, of un-determination then, to the notion of freedom. One can adhere to the principles of an action even though impulses may lead to effects other than what was planned. Virtuosity, thus, involves the ability to enter into and react

---

44 Arendt's difference between telos as model and product in technical activities and telos as principle in political activities is very close to the Aristotelian difference between *techné* and *praxis* in the *NE*, Book I.

45 "Action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of will - (...) - but springs from something altogether different which (following Montesquieu's famous analysis of government) I shall call a principle.", WF, p. 152.

46 We saw that on the contrary, *principium* is contrasted to *initium*. Now the principle is one of - political - action and must therefore be connected to the term *initium*.

47 WF, p. 152 f.

48 WF, p. 152.

adequately to the actions of the others and to the unpredictable effects of one's own actions<sup>49</sup>.

The manifestation of an action, lies therefore in the performance itself and, as Arendt adds, the principle is not "exhausted". This expression sounds somewhat odd. Arendt probably means that unlike with technical purposes, there is no need to find a new goal after having acted appropriately. The telos has been fulfilled, but cannot be grasped like a technical product can. There is no necessity to perform some defined completing step, rather new steps and paths can always be employed or invented. This aspect, of course, also emphasizes the notion of freedom in the sense of un-determination.

Moreover, the telos "transcends"<sup>50</sup> the individual purpose. "They do not operate within the self as motivation"<sup>51</sup>, "but from without", from outside the self, we are left to complete this sentence on our own. It is not easy to reformulate this universality of the principle as a "freedom from" individual interests, because the notion "universality" usually describes a non-relative validity (one independent of persons or cultures) which implies a stronger moral tie rather than a release. But of course, it articulates a disengagement from personal motives and particular interests within the public space<sup>52</sup>.

Arendt observes that the manifestation of the principle does not depend on the circumstances, which are measured by judgment, nor does it depend on the purposes, stated by reason and will. This underlines again her distinction between the initiative aspects of action and the executive elements of an activity, in which will and reason cooperate, and which fall under Arendt's category of work<sup>53</sup>.

At this point, it is still not clear whether freedom itself is a principle or a habitus (a hexis), like a virtue, to follow the right "or the opposite" principles, but it seems to be the latter: "Freedom appears where the principles are actualized."

We commonly assume that freedom means the possibility to realize something. That would be a positive definition of freedom. But for the realization, that Arendt is referring to, failure does not seem to be at issue. Perhaps it is realized already simply by bearing the right principles in mind. But don't they have to be manifested somehow, if not in a result? They may be realized in an Aristotelian way, by choosing "the middle way", the mesotes, between two polarities. But wouldn't this come too close to what Arendt calls freedom of choice between two possibilities, which is freedom of the will?

Goals such as glory, equality, excellence and honor might guide an action and only be apparent in a stylistic way. If we distinguish, with Aristoteles, between individual activities and a learnt, rehearsed, more permanent habitus, then we need not interpret the middle way as some kind of arithmetical mean of a given collection of possible actions. After all, that would be no more than a quantified scale that would calculate what was "best for", or "worst for" according to a goal-means equation. Instead, the hexis of the mesotes refers to an intermediate, moderate attitude towards passions which helps one to

---

49 I am grateful to Wolfgang Heuer for this reference.

50 This cannot be an end in a utilitarian sense, as the principle is independent of other purposes.

51 WF, p. 151.

52 See the „freedom from“, i.e., abstraction and avoidance, of politics. See FuP, p. 216.

53 This opens another systematic problem in HC. Arendt's systematic of the ideal activities does not suggest that they appear „purely“ in modern times. In many cases there will occur a mixture of elements of the given idealized activities. But even then it is not clear if action and work can be strictly divided.

bind oneself to the ethically good principles<sup>54</sup>. So we can confirm that there is a conceptual difference to the freedom of will.

But if "excellence" is one of the principles and freedom is also excellence, as we saw above, then the virtue freedom is also the principle freedom. It appears now that *telos* and *habitus* are mixed up in this passage.

A second slight shift of meaning occurs in this passage of the text, when Arendt explains the sense in which "freedom is inherent in action"<sup>55</sup>. Arendt first gives a definition in which freedom is one possible form of action. "Action insofar as it is free"<sup>56</sup> is contrasted to "action insofar as it is determined"<sup>57</sup>. Later Arendt defines freedom and action as identical: "Men are free when they act...for to be free and to act are the same"<sup>58</sup>. So it is not clear whether action is a descriptive term with two possible manifestations - free and non-free - or a normative term - action deserves to be called action only, when it appears in its free form<sup>59</sup>. This difficulty is general and is due to Arendt's phenomenological method, which she does not explore explicitly<sup>60</sup>.

3. Arendt juxtaposes the antique conflict between the two faculties of reason and passion<sup>61</sup> with another conflict within the will which appeared with Christianity. „What was unknown to antiquity was not that there is such a thing as I-know-but-I-will-not, but that I will and I-can are not the same - non hoc est velle, quod posse.“<sup>62</sup> To understand the difference between these two conflicts as more as a gradual difference, we should take into account the greek metaphor of the taming of the steeds of the soul that Arendt quotes<sup>63</sup>.

The taming of the steeds portrays the conflict between the passions and reason within the soul. In Plato's allegory of the chariot of the personality in the *Phaidros* dialog<sup>64</sup> two different horses are described: one is able to understand and obey words and *logos*<sup>65</sup> and the other is not. While the horses according to Arendt, give the „motion“<sup>66</sup>, the reason, *logos*, sets the direction. *Logos* has to „attune“ the power of the two steeds, so that they „coincide“, where otherwise they might pull in different directions<sup>67</sup>.

We can also envision the Christian model of the will as chariot, but of a different kind, because this time, as Arendt says, the good will "commands"<sup>68</sup>. In the allegory of the chariot we can describe this as the leading will that represses the horses of the natural

---

54 See Wolf, Ursula: *Aristoteles' Nikomachische Ethik*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft Darmstadt, 2002, p. 158 f.

55 WF, p. 153.

56 „It springs from a principle“, WF, p. 152.

57 „...Is guided by a future aim“, WF, p. 151, which refers to the work category.

58 WF, p. 153.

59 This leads again to the systematic problems of HC to divide work and action; resp. to the question, how the ideal activities appear in their empirical form.

60 However, I would suggest that the first chapter about „Appearance“ in „The Life of the Mind“ can be read as a methodical introduction into her work. See Arendt, Hannah: *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. One: Thinking, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, London, 1977.

61 WF, p. 158.

62 WF, p. 158 with reference to Augustine: *Confessiones*, book VII, ch.9.

63 WF, p. 161.

64 *Phaidros* 246 b.

65 *Phaidros* 253 c.

66 WF, p. 158.

67 WF, p. 159.

68 Arendt quotes Paulus in WF, p. 161.

will. In this model there are also two competing powers, but this time one, that is giving the motion, is sitting on the wagon, one standing in front of it. So, they weaken each other. "The two-in one of solitude (...) has the exactly opposite effect on the will: it paralyses and locks it within itself; willing in solitude is always *velle* and *nolle*, to will and not to will at the same time"<sup>69</sup>. Thus, will itself is "broken"<sup>70</sup>.

In Greece, the conflict between reason and the horses of passion may take this form: reason knows what is best, but passion, *tymos*, does not want to follow. Arendt points out that in the intellectual tradition of Socrates' concept, in which virtue is a kind of knowledge, this problem is resolved because reason is stronger in the long run than the passions. Once reason has understood and seen beyond the blinding glare of the passions, they seem to fade away: „there is no passion left to prevent man from doing what he knows is right.“<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, all these conflicts are conceived as conflicts with outer circumstances: "all these factors, the psychological ones not excluded, condition the person from the outside"<sup>72</sup>. Therefore the art of freedom consists of the virtuosity in skillfully liberating oneself from these necessities. We can even transfer this kind of pressure of necessity to modern days as compulsion to consume, that we have to free ourselves from, in order to find out what our real interests are. Alternatively, we portray the conflict as a battle between good will and passions. This Christian model of the will is reflexive: the will commands the self, not the outer world, the self is therefore the place of the conflict, not a struggle between the ego and external obstacles.

Can we now answer the question of whether political freedom in Arendt's concept of virtue can be viewed as a good relationship towards oneself - with a directing principle that inspires, but does not compel, as the governing purpose?

Although it may be indispensable for Foucault to presuppose a constitutional notion of intersubjectivity for his concept of self-care<sup>73</sup>, Arendt's refusal to see virtue as a relationship towards the self is too strong to support this analogy.

On the contrary, her critique rests on the claim that the reflective shift to a freedom of the will goes hand in hand with the fall of the political. While both Foucault and Arendt are searching for interruptions, resistant correctives of the automatisms of the social, Foucault constructs them as singular elements while Arendt vehemently denies that solitude can be a political source and she conceptualizes resistant impulses only within a network.

4. One problematic aspect lies in the fact that within Arendt's systematic political freedom constantly presupposes mastery of the private. „Only those could begin something new who were already rulers (i.e. household heads who ruled over slaves and family)"<sup>74</sup>. This leads to a contradiction in Arendt's argumentation. On the one hand

---

69 WF, p. 158.

70 „A will which is broken in itself“, WF, p. 159.

71 WF, p. 159.

72 WF, p. 160.

73 See Bernd Heiter in: „Intersubjektivität und die „Sorge um sich“. Kommentierende Bemerkungen zu Foucaults interpretativer Analytik der antiken Ethik, pp. 52 - 67, Nachwort zu: Foucault, Michel: *Das Wahrsprechen des Anderen: 2 Vorlesungen von 1983/84*, hrsg. v. Ulrike Reuter u. a., Materialis Frankfurt (Main), 1988, p. 63.

74 WF, p. 166; in German: „Anfangen kann nur dem zufallen, der Herrscher bereits ist“, FuP, p. 218.

sovereignty is rejected as principle in politics and is connected to freedom of will, which, as I have tried to show, can be assigned to the instrumental sphere of work. But on the other hand, Arendt does not miss a chance to underline that being a sovereign and master of the household is the starting point for the Greeks to enter the political sphere and play their role as „archontes“, rulers, beginners and leaders<sup>75</sup>, giving initiatives within politics. Thus being master in both directions, controlling and governing a house as *pater familias* and controlling oneself in „taming the steeds“ is indispensable for being virtuous in the public sphere, where „they no longer ruled but were rulers among rulers“<sup>76</sup>.

This is due to the hierarchy of the activities in HC. Work is fundamental for action; it gives the framework, establishes and defends the polis like the „walls of the polis“, where the political debates and vigour can take place, as if on a stage.

How, then, can Arendt claim that her notion of politics differs considerably from that one of Carl Schmitt? Are politics, in Arendt's systematics, not just as dependant on sovereignty? We can use Arendt's own example of the archontes and *pater familias* to demonstrate this dependency: in the absence of sovereignty, one cannot avoid having to fight for it, either in the case of individuals or of groups, sovereignty must be obtained to regain or establish a foundation for the political realm and free debate. It sounds then nearly cynical to insist on the statement that politics should be free from sovereignty. Politics are portrayed as a purified sphere, but only through relegating their problematical aspects into the nonpolitical arena of violent struggles. The separation of instrumental violence and the free sphere of the political would then be a merely rhetorical means of purifying politics from its seamy side.

One argument in favor of Arendt would be that violence itself, in her systematic framework, is in turn grounded on power and authority and loses its strength when approval, at least tacit consent, is withheld<sup>77</sup>. The other justification is that, Arendt does go on to insist, as no more than this, that the instrumental category of work must be interpreted as functional for politics, while its tendency to dominate and usurp politics, which leads to an erasure of the political realm, must be viewed critically. She stresses the point that although action requires work, as politics encompasses violence and strategy, the former must not be reduced to or confused with the latter. Thus the systematical difference between work and action might culminate in two other notions of freedom which Arendt contrasts in IP: Courage, as we saw above „liberates“ from matters of survival. But this is only the first step. The positive freedom that Arendt links to virtuosity describes how people realize actions in the public sphere. In IP Arendt states in a positivist's manner<sup>78</sup>, that humans must be „liberated“, before being able to be free; thus she distinguishes between „liberation“ which is a purpose that can be achieved by a given means and „freedom“ that exists beyond the technical sphere. How can these two aspects

---

75 WF, p. 166.

76 WF, p. 166.

77 See OV, p. 144.

78 „Man must first be liberated or liberate himself in order to enjoy freedom, and being liberated from domination by life's necessities was the true meaning of the Greek word *scholé* or the Latin *otium* – what we today call leisure. This liberation, in contrast to freedom, was an end that could, and had to, be achieved by certain means. This crucial means was slavery, the brute force by which one man compelled others to relieve him of the cares of daily life. (...) But this rule itself was not political, although it was an indispensable prerequisite of all things political“. IP, p. 116 f.

of freedom - the negative freedom of not being ruled and the positive freedom of not ruling - be conceptualized other than by making violence a necessary but not sufficient pre-requisite for positive freedom? These are the lines to be followed<sup>79</sup> for a further exposition of Arendt's concept of political freedom.

---

79 „'Politics', in the Greek sense of the word, is therefore centered around freedom, whereby freedom is understood negatively as not being ruled or ruling, and positively as a space which can be created only by men and in which each man moves among his peers. Without those who are my equals, there is no freedom (...)” IP, p. 117.

For a primary description of the different concepts of freedom in Arendt's political theory see Bonnie Honig: *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1993.

The distinction between liberation and freedom is crucial for Arendt's *differentiation* between Rebellion and Revolution, see Arendt, Hannah: *On Revolution*, New York, Penguin Books, 1968, Chapter 1, part II. For a new interpretation of political freedom in the sense of isonomia, see Balibar, Etienne: (De)constructing the Human as Human Institution. A Reflection on the Coherence of Hannah Arendt's Practical Philosophy, in: *Hannah Arendt: Verborgene Tradition – Unzeitgemäße Aktualität?* Berlin, Akademie Verlag (forthcoming November 2007). For a beautiful interpretation of *initium* as a principle, see Birmingham, Peg: *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006.