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## Action and its Meaning: on the contrasting theories of Hannah Arendt and Peter McHugh

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There are serious problems with the familiar notion that it is the discipline of history that is best placed to understand the meaning of what has happened in the past and even what is happening in the present. So great are these problems that they have led Jean-Luc Nancy to conclude that it is not just what has already happened that now belongs to the past:

What today is past, what our time recognizes as *being past*...is history itself. (Nancy, 1993,144, emphasis in original)

He means that history has lost its privileged status as how we access events.

Nancy explains the problematic state that ensues as follows:

It is as if we were acknowledging that history is our modern form of myth, and that, at the same time, a certain 'historical reality' remained, behind textuality and subjectivity, as the real infinite or indefinite development of time. It is as if we were suspended between both: either something happens that we cannot grasp in our representation, or nothing happens but the production of historico-fictitious narratives. (148)

On the one hand we most certainly feel- are convinced-that things are happening in the present but on the other hand we feel we lack the capacity to adequately represent them at present. The traditional solution would be to assume that, once they are past-history-historians will be able to do the adequate representing work that contemporaries cannot. However, Nancy suggests that this assumption has now lost its credibility. Similar ideas have been expressed in less extreme form by the noted theorist of history, Hayden White (White, 1973). He too would say that history is not better placed than present actors to represent events because their work should be seen as 'historico-fictitious narrative' rather than as a representation of what really happened.

If Nancy's (and White's) critique of the validity of history has even a modicum of truth, it can stimulate a rethink of what is still one of the most compelling analyses of the human condition there has been, Hannah Arendt's theory of action. To summarize her main points, Arendt differentiates three fundamental human activities, labor, work, and action. When we labor we deal with the necessities for individual and species survival. Work is how we produce 'a world of things.' (Arendt, 1958, 7) As against these, action is 'the only activity that goes on directly between men (sic) without the intermediary of things and matter.' (7) She has in mind what we do by 'word and deed' (176) but in particular when these are 'not forced upon us by necessity' or even 'prompted by utility'. (177) While actions in this sense can be characterized by practical purposelessness, her key idea is that it is only by action that we manage to have 'a human life,' (176) the reason being that it is only:

In acting and speaking that men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the world. ( 179)

As such, action is the distinctively human opportunity we are offered as long as we are alive-present in the world. And here we get the major correspondence between how Nancy

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describes life in the present and how Arendt does. Both think it is impossible for us to fully understand what we are doing in the present. As he asserts that we cannot represent the present in the present, she asserts that 'nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word' or, again the 'full meaning' of action is never available to current participants. (180)

Arendt is reluctant to rest content with the notion of us remaining as permanently powerless to understand the present as she thinks its participants are. But the remedy for this inability is the *very one that Nancy treats as discredited*. According to Arendt:

Action reveals itself fully only...to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. (192)

Needless to say, this is not the historian conceived as Nancy and White conceive him, namely as an author of fictitious narratives. In the light of their critique of history, it is troubling that Arendt seems compelled to invest history with such powers. Is it actually necessary for her to rely so much on history? While Arendt's point that participants do not have access to the full meaning of their actions must be right, could it be her *specific* version both of the extent to which meaning is not available and of what blocks this access that leads to her relying so much on history for an understanding of action? That there could be a problem with Arendt's conception of action is the possibility we now begin to explore.

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By the current ambiguity of an action's meaning what Arendt has in mind is that 'its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended'. (192) She thinks of it as ended when all its results are known. For her, then, the specific reason participants cannot know the full meaning of their actions is because they can never be privy to all their acts *effects*.

Even though it is certainly true that the full effects of an action are never known to the participants, it has to be said that this version of the problem of discerning the meaning of actions in the present involves quite a substantial reduction in the powers of current participants. Thus Arendt writes: 'All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian's hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness.' (192) Surely both that motives are quite *this* unreliable and, as already suggested, the extent to which historians will necessarily know better seem dubious conclusions. It is therefore worth considering what might be leading Arendt both to such a disparaging view of current motives and other ways actors seek to explain their own actions in the present and such an over-reliance on historians.

Here we must refer to Arendt's most fundamental thoughts about life itself. Arendt sees a problem with life that action has the potential-but only the potential-to remedy. She notes 'the fleeting character of human time' (8) so the problem has something to do with our lack of endurance. But, more specifically, she writes of life as a 'process that everywhere uses up durability, wears it down, makes it disappear, until eventually dead matter...returns into the over-all gigantic circle of nature...' (96) Life per se is a process of 'eternal recurrence.' (97)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here, of course, she is referencing Nietzsche.

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Based on realizing that as well as being born we also die, she is thinking of life and the inevitable death that is part of it as a process of return. She makes two points about this state of affairs. While she treats both points as equally valid, the second is much more debatable than the first. The first point is that it is all 'cyclical.' (96) The second point is a worry that if this is what it is like, it is not clear that any one who lives 'moves at all.' (19) Because, in a life that ends in death, one sees oneself headed back toward where one started, she is right that it can feel as if one is not getting anywhere. However, since one can move along a circular path, in which case this feeling of non movement can be seen as a mistaken impression stemming from the fact that one does not realize that the path one is on goes in a circle, it is highly problematic to treat movement along a circle as not moving. But Arendt does accept that if this is the process of life, it does amount to not getting anywhere. She thus thinks she needs to find another-non-circular- possibility for life if she is to avoid this apparent lack of movement with the potential futility of mortal life that it seems to entail. In other words, for her to understand life as movement, the movement must be linear, thereby avoiding ending up headed back toward where it began.

At first our ability to engage in action does not seem to offer a solution because, after all, if life does not go on forever and so seems to not get us anywhere, action too does not appear to last. As she puts it, there is 'the fleeting moment of the deed.' (192) But she has a way of saying that the moment of actual doing is not the end of it. Deeds can have- she says they inevitably will have- stories which are their outcome. Action can last, then, in the form of the stories that tell of their results. She calls these stories 'the imperishable traces'. (19) As such, they manage to 'cut through the circular movement of biological life' thereby being the one thing that escapes circular motion and so avoids lives that would be merely futile. (19) Historians fulfill a key role in this account because it is to them that we are dependent for these stories. History, then, becomes what saves our lives from being futile.

However, we have seen that, as history is likely to supply not the facts but stories that are not that different from myths, it is not really up to this task. The question that arises is whether circularity might not be quite the problem that Arendt thinks it is and whether, if not, the problem of the meaning of acts, while not self-evident, might not depend to such an extent on eventual results as determined by supposedly objective historians.

Arendt's insight that if one cannot find some clear-cut result for an action, there is something circular about the whole process of acting is surely right but is she equally right that because action has this property it would necessarily be futile? Worth considering in this respect are certain key differences in how, in some relatively recent work, Peter McHugh, unlike Arendt, imagines action.

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A place to begin the comparison is in their respective treatments of natality. Arendt makes more of the fact of birth than we have indicated so far. As explained above, she thinks of action as being without its meaning until we know its results. However, she also argues that action would not happen at all if humans did not grasp the opportunity that being born represents. Arendt understands being born as 'the beginning...of somebody.' (177) Action is like this, it is 'like a second birth' (176) because she conceives doing or saying something, particularly when it is not necessary to do it, as amounting to 'beginning something new.' (177) As to be born is to be a 'beginner', to act is like this because by so doing we 'confirm and take upon ourselves' that birth right by beginning something. (176)

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McHugh agrees that what it is to be born can teach us something about the nature of action but the aspect of birth that he focuses on is that it is an 'experience of having been thrown into...a world that had come before' (McHugh, 2011, 262) or, in the same vein, that the birth experience is a recognition of 'having entered a place that is already underway'. (262) To see action as like this is to imagine action as, not so much a new start, but rather as a way of entering.

Unlike McHugh, Arendt does not go on to see acts as defined by their likeness to the fact of death as much as they are by the fact of being born. For her, the point is for acts, as it were, not to die at all, an outcome supposedly achieved by their results, in so far as these results are turned into imperishable traces by historians. For McHugh, just as there is an aspect of action that is birth-like, i. e. arriving at a place that is already underway, there is also an aspect that is like death. (262) Birth is like one aspect of action because action 'comes' in the sense of enters and death is like another part of action because action eventually goes in the sense of leaves. (McHugh, 2006, 6)

How action can be said to inevitably leave and so be death-like will become clearer if we can further specify how McHugh conceives the form of action's arrival. To arrive -to enter- is to be present with others. It is to 'connect' with them though connecting does not mean you are not separate. (McHugh, 2011, 261) You are separate in that you are another one of those who are connected to you by present with you.

Your presence is expressed and felt by others-really your presence is constituted by others-via your actions. But of course there will also come a point-the death-like point-when your actions will cease. The key issue is whether your eventual absence means the whole thing has been futile. We suggest: only if one assumes that the whole point was to arrive at a destination as is the case with linear rather than circular movement. But cannot the point or better the opportunity be to be one of those-another one of those- who has made the journey? *Certainly there are journeys where you end up heading back toward where you started that are not necessarily futile.* McHugh's idea is to imagine a journey that at once would be circular but not necessarily be futile in the following way. If you will have lived and died-acted and ceased to act- that means, not that you have not gone anywhere, but that you are one of those who have been *circulating*. (McHugh, 2006 and 2011) That to be in circulation is to be on a journey is further reinforced by how McHugh depicts the phenomenon of circulating. He writes that it is to be 'carried' so we can say that our comings and goings are like a journey because they are like being on a vehicle that brings us in and eventually takes us out, the vehicle that accomplishes this being the fact that humans who live (and die and act and eventually stop acting) get to circulate. (McHugh, 2011, 266)

The idea that one's actions are in circulation leads to a very different understanding of the scope of action than we get from Arendt. Like Arendt, McHugh mentions the capacity to initiate but whereas for her this is *all* action amounts to, he also notes the ability to make a 'response', the response includes being in a position to 'reject and accept what we do as we do it' and also the ability to 'resist'. (McHugh, 2011, 264, 267) Furthermore as well as all of these, there is the ability 'to be oriented to an other as fact and possibility.' (264)

Crucially, these two differing versions of the possibilities for action lead to quite different understandings of how the meaning of acts is determined. For Arendt, as we saw, the meaning of any present act must await the judgment of historians. One acts-initiates-starts it- and it is up to the historians to see how it ends. For McHugh, the meaning of an act-

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what will circulate-can be influenced in the present by any or all of the just noted capacities we have.

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Just how different a view of the extent to which present participants can influence meaning requires looking in some detail at what difference it makes that we do all the activities just mentioned. For illustration, we will work with a typical action from everyday life. The act to be considered is the act of leaving a party early, one's motive being boredom.<sup>2</sup> Quite irrespective of how trustworthy one is, what McHugh flags as one's ability to be oriented to others as fact and possibility should alert one to the likelihood that what it will likely mean to them-what will circulate with others-is that you found the party boring. Firstly, given your knowledge of what it is likely to mean, it is quite possible that one would decide not to do it at all. Here we see quite an important initial difference from Arendt in that her view that the meaning of an act will only be available when its results are known leads to the conclusion that calculation beforehand is beside the point. Hence her conclusion that there is inevitably courage in 'the willingness to act and speak at all.' (186) If we have a sense of what it is likely to mean (to existing or possible others) certainly that can lead to the, if not cowardly, at least sensible caution of thinking what it could mean *before* we actually do it.

Even if one does go ahead with it, as McHugh says, there is the capacity to reject the meaning that would now be circulating and here too one's ability to orient to others will play a crucial role. A successful outright rejection will almost certainly require demonstrating that the currently circulating interpretation of the act does not make sense. Therefore, not any alternative motive will work but only one that is both trustworthy and changes the sense of the action. For example, that one had another appointment could change one's act's meaning but only if such a motive is at best verifiable or at the very least plausible.

Besides rejecting, accepting that an act has the meaning that others attribute to it could serve to influence what circulates, in the most obvious case merely reinforcing the conclusion that one found the party boring. But, even if one accepts that leaving early was due to boredom, it may still not follow that one has no further ability to influence what meaning circulates. A further aspect of one's ability to orient to others is to appreciate that even what does make sense, e. g. leaving a party out of boredom, may appear unacceptable. In other words, what could circulate about one's behavior is that one has been acting *unreasonably*. Here, one's power to influence what one's act means could take the form of citing an acceptable (to the others one is orienting to) reason for leaving a party early out of boredom. For example, for many possible others, there would be a drastic change in meaning depending on key information one might be able to supply about the kind of party it is and the kind of guest one was, say on the one hand it being an event one was not even invited to and gatecrashed without one's arrival even being noticed, on the other that it happened to be one's own retirement do.

A still further way in which the actor can influence what meaning will circulate is stimulated by McHugh's observation that we also have the capacity to 'resist'. (267) Even if one accepts both that it is indeed boredom that explains one's act and that, because of the kind of party it is, many others to whom one is oriented would deem one's act unreasonable, one can attempt to resist these others' conclusions by attempting to

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<sup>2</sup> This section develops an example first presented in McHugh et al. , 1974, p. 29 and p. 40. It also draws on a discussion of the self-reflective actor in earlier work that McHugh co-authored with Alan Blum (Blum and McHugh, 1984, pp. 114-21).

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formulate the meaning of the act as a way of signifying to others what, contrary to current conventions (which define what is seen as reasonable), they should need and desire a thing, in this case a party, to be. One could resist (and potentially drastically affect one's act's meaning) by denying that all it means is that one has an unacceptably low boredom threshold. That instead it is a way of signifying that there is something wrong with the current convention that one should merely grin and bear it no matter how boring a party happens to be.

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Even in such a mundane case, we have seen the various ways-ways that go well beyond merely initiating things-that a living actor can influence the meaning of his or her actions. What changes when the actor dies? We shall find both some commonalities but also some key differences with Arendt's idea that action and actors achieve full meaning after death via their eventual-permanent-results. According to McHugh:

There can be-most often will be, sooner or later, a point of circulatory cessation, relegation to potter's field, for the totally forgotten and now disposable postmortem dead, as circulation exotically passes away from itself, serving instead to escort, as it were, the dead to their exclusive habitat on the other side. (265)

The first point to be noted is that, in his conception, even long term, not to mention permanent post-mortem continuation is not seen as likely. On the other hand, while for almost everyone, there is no exact equivalent to the *imperishable* trace that Arendt envisions for actions, yet for McHugh too it seems that the meaning of acts is not fully determined when a person dies. In his analysis, this is because the point of 'circulatory cessation' is not the point of physical death.

When there is substantial circulation after death, what form will this post-mortem circulation take, given that the actual author of the acts is no longer in any position to help determine the meaning of what he or she has done? What McHugh points out is that, in the absence of the actor, it is the power of others that comes to the fore: 'Any circulation of the dead in life is generated by those who are living.' (264) Here at least, Arendt would not disagree. However, these others are certainly not only and certainly not primarily historians. Thus, they include: 'Family and friends, idlers, enemies, admirers, evaluators, casuals...anyone connected in any way...' (264) If this is who will keep the meaning circulating, what can we conclude about how that content will be affected? A very different picture emerges than that the full meaning of the act will come to be known. McHugh's idea is that we must bear in mind two 'major conditions' in evaluating the status-really the validity-of this content. First is: 'the perfect asymmetry of resources and power between living and dead, the seductive monopoly of remodeling, after-fashioning, revisionism, even venality by the living'. (266)

This can be seductive for them because a major potential obstacle no longer stands in the way of their efforts, even in the extreme their venal ones, in keeping the meaning of the dead in circulation. This is the obstacle that can be provided by the person who, after all, did it, given the fact that they are no longer in a position to demonstrate how unreasonable some new interpretation is or even how it does not even make sense. Nor, needless to say, can they object to some new negative interpretation by articulating the principle it was undertaken to signify.

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Second is the peculiar nature of what can circulate. McHugh writes of 'circulations's own impregnable power as one universal form in the structure of the social.' (266) What is so impregnable about its power is both how extensive and how variable its content is. We already noted that it takes the form of a vehicle. Now McHugh adds that it is 'an ontological beast of burden.' (266) This metaphor serves to emphasize that *all* human acts, everything anyone does in the presence of others, at least temporarily enters circulation. As a beast of burden it carries 'the entire panoply of transitive conduct without arbitration by value or values.' (266)

Not only are the dead, because of the powers they have lost, in no position to combat even senseless interpretations of their acts. Given the nature of circulation, the only thing stopping a new interpretation of the meaning of one's act or acts at least entering circulation is if no one, including one's most venal enemy, puts it forward. (McHugh, 2006. 5-6) Returning to the comparison with Arendt, the point would be that by grossly underestimating the powers of the living to affect the meaning of their acts, she ends up not being able to see how vulnerable they may be, when they are no longer living, to outright distortion by others.

Due to the fact that there will almost certainly be those who were close to the dead who do not share a venal intention and who, due to their closeness, are likely to have verifiable information which changes the picture, it is unlikely that, in practice, the dead will be all that vulnerable to their outright enemies. Close friends and family are likely to be able to point to verifiable facts that are so discrepant with at least the most venal interpretations as to render the circulation of these relatively short-lived.

However, given that even the closest of friends 'however faithful' are likely both to have fallible memories and intentions of their own plus, of course, the fact that they too will not be around forever, there is little or no prospect of any dead person not being subject to having their meaning circulate in ways that will change post-mortem. (McHugh, 2011, 267) How both the nature of circulation and the asymmetric influence of others may affect actual cases of circulation can be glimpsed in the three examples chosen by McHugh.

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He selects three cases which, on the face of it, could confirm Arendt's view of how the true meaning is given only by historian in that these three, unlike most of us, do appear in history books. He considers Plato, Che Guevara, and Elvis Presley. (McHugh, 2011, 263) Certainly all of these live on but in each case it has to be admitted that the content of the continuing circulation owes less to historians than it does to three factors, the inability of the actors themselves to continue to control meaning, the role of interested others, and the indiscriminate, laissez-faire nature of circulation. Thus, in the case of Elvis, his survival as the so-called king depends more, not on what musical historians might conclude, many of them would lament that he is grossly overrated, but on the fact that there are numerous persons for whom to describe them as merely interested parties is a gross understatement. They have gone so far as to maintain him in circulation by impersonating him. In the case of Che, what is most striking is how much of his continuing circulation is owed to nothing more substantial than a single photograph. And in the case of Plato, while his continuing longevity can only be marveled at, what is perhaps even more to be marveled at is that, after all this time, there is such wild disagreement on what his 'results' even are, if by that we mean, as we should in the case of a philosopher, what he was actually saying. As these cases suggest, persons can stay in circulation for some time but it is dubious to say by virtue of the full meaning of their acts as recorded in history.



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If we accept McHugh's version, we need to object to Arendt's characterization of post-humous fate on three grounds. Firstly, while it is true that most people do leave a mark after death, the mark would normally disappear fairly soon. In this respect, Plato, Che, and Elvis are atypical. Second, lasting marks cannot be seen as definitive statements of what acts and actors mean. Third, even when the mark does last for some considerable time (as with Che and Elvis), it is not likely to last for as long as Arendt thinks it must (forever really) to rescue action and life from futility.

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Now to return to the most basic issue dividing Arendt and McHugh, does it mean that action is necessary futile if continuing circulation takes the forms McHugh says it does? After stating that almost everyone is fated to cease to circulate eventually, McHugh remarks:

Presumably, those driven to make an indelible mark live in dread of this above all, but in the event it will make no difference to them. (McHugh, 2011, 268)

The implication is that it is only the irrationally driven who would have such a fear. Arguably, this conclusion follows from his analysis both of how the living circulate and how the dead do. The main reason why a life and action with both ending should not be seen as futile applies not just to those rare persons who do make a long-lasting mark but also to more typical persons whose further circulation tends to be much more short-lived and likely to take the form of being missed for a while by those close to them. As reassuring as the prospect of being missed is, the more compelling reason why the inevitable ending of life and of one's meaning does not amount to futility goes back to the already mentioned suggestion that there need be no dread of eventually having to head back to where you came from because that does not cancel out the fact that you have been given the opportunity to make the journey, in other words, as being one of those who has been in circulation.

As for the few who do enter history for some extended period of time, that for them too the mark is not likely to be indelible could/should be no cause for dread if they appreciate what form such greatly extended circulation is likely to take. Thus, returning to the examples, If one's continuing circulation takes such forms, whether it be still being here courtesy of actual impersonators, living on more on the 'evidence' of a photograph than anything else, or still circulating due to a legacy at once so lasting and so unclear that it is as if, as McHugh puts it, one's interpreters have discovered and are reading from 'contradictory wills.' (McHugh, 2011, 267) we cannot help but conclude there is a strong element of farce in long-term continuing circulation. As such, here is one good reason why the fact that they too are likely to end up in potter's field does not demonstrate the futility of action. They could well be content to stop circulating if they could know some of the farcical ways in which whatever they meant has come to be used by others

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