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“The Wheel is Crooked”: Hannah Arendt on action, success, and public happiness^{1 2}

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1. Introduction

In a little discussed 1960 essay, titled “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’” Hannah Arendt tells the story of “an inveterate gambler.” She says the story was once told to her by an acquaintance who she describes as a former radical, an ex-communist or ex-Trotskyite.

I was told a story, the story of an inveterate gambler who happened to arrive late in a strange town and naturally proceeded forthwith to the gambling place. There a native approached him and warned him that the wheel was crooked, whereupon the stranger replied: ‘But there is no other wheel in town.’ The moral of the story was clear: In those days, my acquaintance implied, if you had the itch to do something, you had no other place to go [...]³

The story, she suggests, “tells us that there exists such intense happiness in acting that the actor, like the gambler, will accept that all the odds are stacked against him.”⁴ In this article I investigate references to success in Arendt’s work in order to argue that she sought to preclude action and happiness from utilitarian notions of success. For Arendt, acting in public does not need to be tied to success to generate a particular type of

1 This article draws on my brief discussion of the story of the “inveterate gambler” which appeared in the Hannah Arendt Center’s *Quote of the Week*. See, Alex Cain, “Hannah Arendt on Public Happiness,” *Quote of the Week*, Medium, updated February 13, 2023, accessed March 13, 2023.

2 This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship and a Monash Graduate Excellence Scholarship.

3 Hannah Arendt, “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’” in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2018), 205.

4 *Ibid.*, 206. I wonder whether this acquaintance was not the novelist Randall Jarrell, a good friend of both Hannah Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blücher. His hilarious novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, is dedicated both to Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt—“To Mary and Hannah”—and models the couple “The Rosenbaums” upon Hannah Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blücher. In this novel, in just the first few pages, something very like the story of the inveterate gambler appears, although there it is applied to a person rather than the phenomenon of action. Jarrell paints the following picture of the character Gertrude, who is modelled on Mary McCarthy: “Gertrude’s wheel was fixed, everybody soon found; and yet most of us, fools that we are, could not resist going back to play at it.” Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9. Of course this is purely speculative—perhaps the acquaintance was another friend—but the scene is remarkably similar, even if the overall point is very different.

“happiness.” Rather, a particular happiness accompanies appearing in public no matter the outcome of the action. Ultimately, Arendt highlights the tragic aspect of the human condition. The conditions of plurality and natality make action possible, but simultaneously the conditions of plurality and natality also mean that human beings never fully achieve what they set out to. She makes this claim via a discussion of historians and poets, who look back over human action and the world and are pleased by the human dignity they see in human beings who act. I conclude by pointing out that what remains unclear in Arendt’s work is precisely how the public happiness of the actor and the pleasure of the historian and poet might be related.

Arendt’s work on public happiness has only limited attention in the scholarship. Those who have written on the topic have often taken *On Revolution* as their primary text. According to Keith Breen, in Arendt’s work “‘public happiness,’ [is] the joy and satisfaction derivable from engagement with others in common, public affairs.”⁵ Peg Birmingham argues that for Arendt, “Public happiness [...] is the pleasure of appearing in a common world that delivers us from obscurity; it is the pleasure of being visible—being seen and recognized by equals; it is the pleasure of our own image granted only through the perspectives of others. And, finally, this pleasure is the animating bond of the ‘we’; it provides an animating or dynamic basis for the political bond or what Arendt calls ‘the solidarity of humanity.’”⁶ Ultimately, according to Birmingham “Our pleasure in the company of others is a pleasure in the sensation of our own reality as an appearance.”⁷ Olivia Guaraldo, using the event of the Arab Spring as a backdrop, suggests that Arendt’s notion of public happiness offers an opportunity to begin to conceive of an affective foundation for politics as an alternative to the agonistic paradigms currently the norm in neo-liberal societies.⁸ Both Birmingham and Guaraldo offer plausible accounts and criticisms of Arendt’s account of public happiness, but both accounts take *On Revolution* as their primary text and as such have not dealt with the story of the inveterate gambler, which, as far as I know, only appears in “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness.’” As a result, these existing readings of Arendt on public happiness miss—or at least marginalize—the “moral of the story.”⁹ By centering the story of the inveterate gambler and focusing my attention primarily on the “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness’” essay in which it appears, I aim to show that for Arendt human beings are compelled towards action and its corresponding affect, “public happiness,” even though they rarely, if ever, fully achieve what they set out to achieve. As such, the pursuit of public happiness has a tragic aspect, whereby wherever human beings “win” public happiness for themselves, there is also a sense in which they “lose” insofar as they do not fully achieve their aims. This, for Arendt,

5 Keith Breen, “Arendt, Republicanism, and Political Freedom,” in *Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution*, ed. Kei Hiruta (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 56.

6 Peg Birmingham, “The Pleasure of your Company: Arendt, Kristeva, and an Ethics of Public Happiness,” *Research in Phenomenology* 33, no. 1 (2003): 55-56, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640360699609>.

7 Ibid., 72.

8 Olivia Guaraldo, “Public Happiness: Revisiting an Arendtian Hypothesis,” *Philosophy Today* 62, no. 2 (2018): 398.

9 Hannah Arendt, “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’” in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2018), 205.

is a result of being conditioned by plurality, of being always already born into a network of relations over which the individual human being only ever has limited influence. It is therefore the exercising of human dignity, of daring to act with and appear to and with others, even amidst likely defeat, that corresponds to “public happiness.”

2. The pursuit of public happiness and the pursuit of private happiness

It is important to understand Arendt’s distinctions between public life, private life, and the social realm before we can understand the significance of her claim that human beings can feel a sense of public happiness that is so intense that they act even though they know that “the wheel is crooked,” and that they probably will not win. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt takes up the distinction between private and public life in the ancient Greek polis: “The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state.”¹⁰ Arendt also controversially identifies a third sphere of life: the social. The social is, according to Arendt, “neither private nor public, strictly speaking.”¹¹ Rather, the social refers to the sphere of life in which the necessities of private life have overgrown into public life, where the private needs and wants of individuals now appear in public.¹²

Arendt takes up the meaning of the inalienable right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness’” and in *On Revolution*. Arendt points out that while the notion of “public happiness” might seem strange to us now, it was common in the eighteenth century.¹³ When Jefferson drafted the Declaration, he “changed the current formula in which the inalienable rights were enumerated from ‘life, liberty and property’ to ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’”¹⁴ Arendt notes that this change, though surely important, was never questioned, “and this curious lack of attention to a phraseology, which in the course of the following centuries has contributed to a specifically American ideology more than any other word or notion, stands almost as much in need of explanation as the phrase itself.”¹⁵ Arendt thinks that the phrase was not questioned because of its familiarity and many people probably simply assumed that it denoted private happiness. She traces the phrase back to “the conventional idiom in royal proclamations where ‘the welfare and the happiness of our people’ quite explicitly meant the private welfare of the subjects and their private happiness, that is, exactly what the ‘pursuit of happiness’ has come to mean throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”¹⁶ This notion of private happiness is closely tied to the protection of an individual’s property and hence to private rights: a certain contentment or satisfaction

10 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 28.

11 Ibid.

12 Against Arendt, Pitkin argues that this notion of “the social” is largely mythical. See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

13 Arendt, “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness’,” 211.

14 Ibid., 212.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

associated with freely going about one’s own business in the knowledge that one’s safety and property will be protected. Think, for example, of a stereotypical image of a 1950s happy American family: this image would probably be of a nuclear family standing in front of their large home with white picket fence, a new car gleaming in the driveway, nice clothes, family members grinning. This image illustrates what Arendt means when she says that the phrase has contributed to a specifically American ideology, namely the ideology of individualism. Private happiness is a welfare or faring well thought out in economic terms, where an individual’s self-interests are met, where that individual is free to do whatever gives them personal satisfaction, so as long as doing so does not actively impinge upon the private happiness of another. Private happiness is a subjective happiness: what makes one human being happy—the picket fence, the gleaming car, the nuclear family—may make another human being miserable, for example, if that human being prefers living in a minimalist apartment in the city, without children, perhaps renting, travelling frequently and so on. Private happiness is not an *interactive* feeling, it is not something that requires being shared with or displayed to others in order for it to occur. While one person can understand that the nuclear family makes another person happy or satisfied, they do not participate in the happiness or satisfaction of the other, and are not required for the other’s happiness. This notion of private happiness is not predicated on the human condition of plurality: the fact that human beings, and not a human being in the singular, live in the world and on the earth.¹⁷

Arendt points out, however, that prior to the American revolution of 1775-1783, it was not uncommon for the phrase “public happiness” to be used instead of “welfare and happiness,” which means private welfare and happiness.¹⁸ Jefferson himself wrote in 1774 that the emigrants to America had emigrated “to promote public happiness,” and even defined public happiness as “a share in ‘the government affairs,’ that is, in public power, as distinct from the generally recognized right to be protected by the government even against public power.”¹⁹ Although the notion of the “pursuit of happiness” was by and large taken to be associated with private happiness, there was in fact historical precedent to understand the term happiness in its public sense. According to Arendt,

As far as the Declaration of Independence is concerned we doubtlessly are supposed to hear the term ‘pursuit of happiness’ in a twofold meaning even though these meanings can hardly be reconciled either historically or conceptually. In this instance, Jefferson’s felicity of pen succeeded only too well in blurring the distinctive line between ‘private rights and public happiness’ (James Madison), which had the obvious immediate advantage that [...] his draft formula would also appeal to those in the assembly who wished to give their attention ‘exclusively to their personal

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7. Arendt uses gender exclusive language in her formulation of this point: plurality is “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” I retain her meaning but prefer to use the gender-neutral terms “human beings” and “human being.”

¹⁸ Arendt, “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’” 212.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

interests’ (Cooper), not to be bothered any further with public affairs and a ‘public happiness’ which they neither understood nor desired.²⁰

In other words, Arendt thinks that when the Declaration of Independence was drafted there was an attempt to appeal *both* to those who thought that private property was paramount, that is, to those who thought the private happiness of individuals was the ultimate measure of government success *and* to those who thought that the flourishing of the community and citizen participation in government affairs was the ultimate measure of government success. Public life and the happiness which Arendt says accompanies appearing in public with and to other human beings is a happiness that deals with the world—it involves all citizens—not only those who do well for themselves in their private lives. In a letter to David Riesman, dated March 9, 1949, Arendt writes that:

in politics we do not act as individuals but as citizens who together with others inhabit a common world. In this world, we are equals, as individuals we are not. What binds the tenants of a slum area together is the bad shape of their apartments, but not their individual need for activities. The moment they get good new apartments, they still have a common interest to keep them in shape. I take issue with your approach insofar as ‘the reasons.. [sic] to take an interest in politics are seen from the point of view of the individual entirely’; not because I object to your arguments against liberal idealism (which on the contrary are entirely justified) but because I think that in politics we are always concerned with something which transcends the individual, namely the world. Personal satisfaction in political activities is, it seems to me, the psychological prerequisite of the man who makes politics his career, the statesman, the politician, the diplomat etc. but not of the citizens.²¹

In other words, Arendt thinks that a merely personal satisfaction in politics is dangerous to politics itself. This corresponds with other claims Arendt makes regarding the dangers that personal love and friendship can pose in politics, where loyalty to those with whom we are in a personal relationship can inhibit our abilities to look at an issue without bias.²² It is, in other words, an extension of the claim that the distinction between private and public life should be maintained, and that some things should remain out of public view.

²⁰Ibid., 213.

²¹Hannah Arendt, “Hannah Arendt Papers: Correspondence,” in Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress, 1949, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/ms001004.mss11056.00246>.

²²During a 1964 televised interview, Arendt tells Günther Gaus that, “The directly personal relationship, where one can speak of love, exists of course foremost in real love, and it also exists to a certain extent in friendship. There a person is addressed directly, independent of his relation to the world. Thus, people of the most divergent organizations can still be personal friends. But if you confuse these things, if you bring love to the negotiating table, to put it bluntly, I find that fatal [to politics].” Hannah Arendt, ““What Remains? The Language Remains”: A Conversation with Günther Gaus,” in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, edited by Jerome Kohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 17.

It is worth pointing out that Arendt is not arguing that the welfare or happiness of the collective is a matter of money or wealth. The public happiness Arendt is exploring is not aligned with a welfare state. A state that provides for the private needs of the collective through a public institution would be, according to the discussion of the private, public and social spheres of life above, a kind of "social happiness." In such a state, the private needs of all citizens would—at least in theory—be met through a public institution, perhaps, for example, through a basic income scheme. This is not to say that Arendt would have disapproved of providing for the material needs of all members of society. Rather, it is to say that she would not consider such a scheme to be a matter of public happiness.

What, then, is public happiness? Public happiness seems to be something like the public happiness that Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif experienced during the Arab Spring. In "Public Happiness: Revisiting an Arendtian Hypothesis" Guaraldo uses Soueif's account of the happiness and joy experienced by participants to ask what Arendt's views on public happiness can tell us about understanding the division between neoliberal subjects and the possibilities for intersubjective action in today's world.²³ Soueif observes that: "all these millions look like people awakened from a spell. We look happy. We look dazed. We turn to each other to question, to reassure. A man asks: 'How did they divide us? How did they make us frightened of each other like that?'"²⁴ Public happiness is the affect that corresponds to this experience of *interaction*.²⁵ In this *interaction*, human beings not for the sake of self-interest, or at least not primarily so, but for the sake of appearing with and to other human beings.²⁶ Unlike private happiness, which is a matter of acquiring goods and services that meet one's needs and wants, and thus does not necessitate appearing with and to other people at all, public happiness corresponds to the human condition of plurality, it corresponds to the experience of being present with other people and is not felt if one does not appear to and with others.

Yet Arendt herself did not often write in terms of protests. Rather than protest, she tended to associate public happiness with what participants in council systems experience. She says the 1956 Hungarian Revolution showed "the exhilarating experience of the power that comes from acting together."²⁷ She makes it clear that this feeling is distinct from the happiness or satisfaction one gets from material things: "freedom resides in the human capacities of action and thought, not in material things, or in labor

²³ See Guaraldo, "Public Happiness: Revisiting an Arendtian Hypothesis," 398. Several articles and book chapters have emerged in recent years concerning Arendt's views on revolution and public freedom in relation to the Arab Spring. See, in particular, Anthony F. Lang, "Constitutions Are the Answer!: Hannah Arendt and the Egyptian Revolution," in *Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution*, ed. Kei Hiruta (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

²⁴ Ahdaf Soueif, *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 33.

²⁵ Benhabib makes a case for Arendt's notion of human action to be understood as "interaction." See Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, New edition ed. (Lanham; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 105-13.

²⁶ Kathleen B. Jones, *Diving for Pearls: A Thinking Journey with Hannah Arendt* (San Diego: Thinking Women Books, 2013), 174.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, "The Hungarian Revolution and Totalitarian Imperialism," in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2018), 127.

and earning a living, the activities in which man has to master the material world.”²⁸ Though immaterial, Arendt highlights the bodily effects this public happiness can deliver participants:

The words spoken by men acting in freedom and fighting for it carry more weight and, so we hope, will be taken more seriously than any theoretical reflections, precisely because they are spoken in the excitement and on the spur of the moment. For such excitement is not hysterical and does not dull the mind; rather, it sharpens and furthers the understanding, just as it increases physical abilities and the intensity of the senses, and strengthens the heart.²⁹

Arendt thought that a council system could allow human beings to exercise the urge to see and be seen in public, to insert themselves anew into the world. The revolutionary councils, as conceived by Arendt, were a place to go to voice opinions, to participate in politics as a citizen. This accords with her claim in *The Human Condition* that action must be accompanied by speech.³⁰

The councils would be small and would shun the representative democracy that is the norm in Western nations. Arendt saw merit in council systems insofar as they can be democratic but not representative, where those who “represent” citizens in a democracy usually turn out to be the elite. The key difference between protests and councils seems to be that the councils are more formal in their structure, which in turn makes them more likely to be organized and allows for a stronger capacity for decision-making, whereas protests are generally less formal and are not necessarily aimed at decision-making. What Arendt liked most about the councils is that they allowed the average citizen to enact their freedom, to participate in government: “For political freedom, generally speaking, means the right ‘to be a participator in government’, or it means nothing.”³¹ The happiness felt in seeing and being seen, in hearing and being heard, correlates to the fulfilment of the human freedom to appear to and with others: “men knew they could not be altogether ‘happy’ if their happiness was located and enjoyed only in private life.”³² The councils, Arendt hoped, could offer an institution that allowed for this participation to become a common-place part of democratic life.

3. The risk of appearing and the (un)likelihood of success

While Arendt did not dwell on the topic of protest, what protests and council systems have in common is that they create spaces in which human beings appear with and to one another, and that they often do not fully achieve what they set out to achieve. Karin Fry notes that “Arendt admired the councils from the Hungarian Revolution, even though

²⁸Ibid., 142.

²⁹Ibid., 142-43.

³⁰Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178-179.

³¹Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 210.

³²Ibid., 118.

they did not attain their goals.”³³ Arendt herself says that, “This event [the Hungarian Revolution] cannot be measured by victory or defeat; it’s greatness rests upon and is secure in the tragedy it enacted.”³⁴ During the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, workers councils took control of government from the Hungarian Working People’s Party. The uprising was quelled by the USSR on the 4th of November 1956, with fighting until the 10th of November 1956 killing thousands of people. If the revolution were measured according to whether or not the uprising successfully led to the permanent institution of the councils, then one would have to say it was a failure. Arendt argues, however, that this is not the right way to look at this event. Rather, she argues that it can be looked at in terms of “greatness,” a “greatness” that is evident in the appalling aftermath. Below I hash out what the “greatness” of this tragic event could be, and demonstrate that Arendt is referring to the exercise of human dignity displayed in this otherwise tragic event.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt insists that appearing in public is inherently risky; to appear in public the human being must “risk the disclosure” of who they are through speech.³⁵ Moreover, human beings are plural, they are conditioned by plurality. As a result of this condition of plurality, human beings are always born into an already existing network of human relations. Relationality is a fundamental condition of human life: “The disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt.”³⁶ We can use this claim as we elaborate on the story of the inveterate gambler and as we explore what Arendt thinks is the “greatness” of the Hungarian Revolution: “inveterate gamblers”—we actors—have “arrived late.” For Arendt, human beings are first and foremost “natales” rather than mortals, conditioned by natality. Natality is the fact that “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”³⁷ We human beings have the capacity to begin, but, importantly, we have not arrived at the beginning. There was already a world here when we were born, a network of relations wherein certain conditions, for better or worse, were already in place. At birth we were inserted into this world, with its laws, institutions, borders, beauties, inequalities, injustices, precedents, and so on. We were never asked whether we wanted to come here; we were placed here, each of us in a particular starting position, without our explicit consent. The wheel is already crooked: the systems we find already in place, the power dynamics, the ideologies, etcetera, are already established and they are unequivocally off-balance, favouring some to the detriment of others. The wheel may have once been flat and fair—although it probably never really was—but we can say for certain that when we arrived, late, it was not.

In “On Civil Disobedience,” Arendt writes that

³³ Karin Fry, *Life, Theory, and Group Identity in Hannah Arendt's Thought* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 125.

³⁴ Arendt, “The Hungarian Revolution and Totalitarian Imperialism,” 105.

³⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

A kind of consent is implied in every newborn's factual situation; namely, a kind of conformity to the rules under which the great game of the world is played in the particular group to which he belongs by birth. We all live and survive by a kind of *tacit consent*, which, however, it would be difficult to call voluntary. How can we will what is there anyhow? We might call it voluntary, though, when the child happens to be born into a community in which dissent is also a legal and *de-facto* possibility once he has grown into a man. Dissent implies consent, and is the hallmark of free government; one who knows that he may dissent knows also that he somehow consents when he does not dissent.

Consent as it is implied in the right to dissent—the spirit of American law and the quintessence of American government spells out and articulates the tacit consent given in exchange for the community's tacit welcome of new arrivals, of the inner immigration through which it constantly renews itself. Seen in this perspective, tacit consent is not a fiction; it is inherent in the human condition.³⁸

Again, the metaphor of "playing" appears: the world is a "great game." In this case, Arendt is attempting to lay the groundwork for a political institution that allows for civil disobedience that rightfully renders it distinct from conscientious objection or criminality. Dissent practiced by the civil disobedient is practiced in public with others and is not a matter of either personal conscience or making an exception of oneself. Rather, the civil disobedient acts against a particular law *in the spirit of, or for the sake of, the law*. For the disobedient, every instance of public dissent to a law is, in another sense, a consent to the spirit of the law. To return to the story of the inveterate gambler, we could say that he does have the option of refusing to play the crooked wheel, of dissenting, but he chooses, somewhat voluntarily, to play. If there were other wheels in town, some more crooked than others, perhaps, his choice would be more voluntary, perhaps he could throw up his arms, with other gamblers, and say it is for the sake of gambling more generally that I dissent from gambling at this particularly crooked wheel.

But, according to the story told by the former radical, there was no other wheel in town. Given the gambler's compulsion, he is left with no option but to play the crooked wheel. In the story of the "inveterate gambler" we sense Arendt's incredulity at the fact that any of us decide to "play" at action at all. Playing the crooked wheel, that is, following our human compulsion to speak and act together even amid myriad power imbalances, is unlikely to lead to complete success.

The ends-means category, to which all doing and all producing are necessarily bound, always proves to be ruinous when applied to acting [...] Such an assumption in turn presupposes a world in which there is only a single will, or which is so arranged that

³⁸Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1972), 88.

all the active ego/subjects in it are sufficiently isolated from one another so that there will be no mutual interference of their ends and aims. With action the reverse is true; there is an infinitude of intersecting and interfering intentions and purposes which, taken all together in their complex immensity, represent the world into which each man must cast his act, although in that world no end and no intention has ever been achieved as it was originally intended. Even this description, and the consequent frustrating nature of all deeds, the ostensible futility of action, is inadequate and misleading because really conceived in terms of doing, and that means in terms of the ends-means category.³⁹

"Cast his act" has the connotation of gambling, in the same way as one "casts a die." Action is always a gamble. The likelihood of achieving whatever we set out to achieve is low: "It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose."⁴⁰ With many human beings constantly inserting and reinserting themselves into the world, beginning a series of events each time, we almost never achieve what we set out to achieve. We may even come off worse than when we started. No one knows what their actions will lead to, whether they or others will achieve their aims, whether the action will lead in a completely unexpected direction. During the Hungarian Revolution, action initiated a series of events that led to an ultimately tragic outcome. In these conditions, where action almost never achieves its purpose and can lead to outcomes that were unintended and fundamentally detrimental to those who act, the fact that human beings attempt to "play" at action at all suggests that our motivation to act is independent of having a high likelihood of succeeding at our goal, or winning anything that is of value to us personally and privately.

Despite these "failures" and the low odds of institutional change resulting from action, we know that human beings do indeed act, that they do indeed protest and discuss political matters. Action, then, appears to be something like a compulsion, something we get the itch for, something that we must do even if the odds of achieving what we set out to achieve are stacked against us. Arendt addresses the tragic aspect of the human conditions of plurality and natality at the end of *Thinking*, the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt turns to the following phrase, which she attributes to Cato the Elder: "The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato."⁴¹ Jerome Kohn has shown that this phrase is in fact *not* attributed to Cato the Elder, but to his great grandson, Cato the Younger.⁴² Kohn notes that Arendt repeats this error throughout her

³⁹ Arendt, "Hermann Broch," in *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), 147-48.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking," in *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 216.

⁴² Kohn writes "In fact this is not the same 'old Cato' quoted earlier, but his great grandson, Cato the Younger (95-46BCE), as imitated by the poet Lucan in his epic *Pharsalia*, I, 128. Arendt makes this error consistently, as far back as the 1930s. It is a curious error for someone of her proficiency in scanning classical verse. It is, perhaps, the exception that proves the rule." Jerome Kohn in Arendt, "Preliminary Remarks About the Life of the Mind," in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2018), 524.

work. It may seem like a small error, but it is in fact quite a significant one. Cato the Elder was a soldier, a politician, and an historian. He was also—it goes almost without saying—human, that is, not a god. Cato the Younger, while surely human, was a conservative senator. This occupation is what we might today call a professional politician. Arendt’s error is important because if we associate the phrase with its factually correct origin (Cato the Younger) then we are associating it with a professional politician, and so the phrase would go: the victorious cause pleases the gods, but the defeated cause pleases the professional politician. I do not think Arendt wanted to suggest that the defeated cause pleases the professional politician. In contrast, it seems to me that Cato the Elder’s occupation as an historian is central to her point. We can assume that what Arendt had in mind is that the defeated cause pleases the historian and human being. The politician, like the gods, does indeed seek the victorious cause; the professional politician seeks success for their own cause and themselves. The historian, on the other hand, would not want such a thing. The historian focuses on the relations between human beings, seeking the meaning behind human *interaction*, and these relations mean inevitable unsuccess. Thus, the defeated cause pleases the historian.

Arendt takes the phrase—“The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato”⁴³—to be a “political principle” and associates it with the reclamation of human dignity, where dignity is to be understood as the state of being worthy.⁴⁴ The defeated cause pleases the historian and human being precisely because it is incomplete, imperfect, and thus human. The defeated cause allows human dignity to shine through. It is in the defeated cause that the joy of speaking and acting together shows itself for what it is, since it is separated from the joy of success. The reclamation of this human dignity is surely what Arendt refers to when she discusses it in terms of its “greatness” even though it ended in tragedy.

Daniel Maier-Katkin points out that Arendt refers to human unsuccess when she wrote on her copy of the program at the memorial service for her friend, poet W.H. Auden:

Sing of human unsuccess
*In a rapture of distress.*⁴⁵

This is a quotation from Auden’s requiem, that is, mass for the dead, titled “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” Without quoting the entire poem, we might at least add the surrounding stanzas:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,

⁴³ Arendt, “Thinking,” 216.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Daniel Maier-Katkin, *Stranger from Abroad: Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Friendship, and Forgiveness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 326.

With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.⁴⁶

In fact, Arendt includes these stanzas in her remembrance of Auden. There, she notes that:

Praise is the key word of these lines, not praise of ‘the best of all possible worlds’—as though it were up to the poet (or the philosopher) to justify God’s creation—but praise that pitches itself against all that is most unsatisfactory in man’s condition on this earth and sucks its own strength from the wound: somehow convinced, as the bards of Ancient Greece were, that the gods spin unhappiness and evil things toward mortals so that they may tell the tales and sing the songs.⁴⁷

Unsuccess is human. For Adriana Cavarero, “Both the poet and the historian [...] appeal to the unrepeatability of the unique, not to the universal and the general.”⁴⁸ Both the poet and the historian, in different ways, “make a vineyard of the curse,” that is, find human life amidst wreckage, find praise—happiness—amidst defeat, concern themselves with the particularities of human relationships rather than generalities. According to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Arendt “realized that in searching for the meaning of deeds, humans win all that is possible for them as they look upon past evils—the privilege of judging.”⁴⁹ Arendt considered Auden a great poet, but he was also someone who had been dealt a cruel hand in this world, who had lived a life filled with unrequited love:

What made him a poet was his extraordinary facility with and love for words, but what made him a great poet was the unprotesting willingness with which he yielded to the ‘curse’ of vulnerability to ‘human unsuccess’ on all levels of human existence—

46 W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” in *W. H. Auden Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 198.

47 Arendt, “Remembering Wystan H. Auden, Who Died in the Night of the Twenty-Eighth of September, 1973,” 532.

48 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, ed. Paul A. Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 25.

49 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 2nd ed. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 377.

vulnerability to the crookedness of the desires, to the infidelities of the heart, to the injustices of the world.⁵⁰

Arendt celebrates Auden as a great poet who knew that the “wheel was crooked,” that success would never come, and who nevertheless managed to praise the world as it is. This echoes Arendt’s notion of *amor mundi*, or love of the world.⁵¹ For Arendt, to love the world means to reconcile oneself to it. This reconciliation is not a mere acceptance of the world as it is, but is rather made up of two affects that one might otherwise think are opposites: gratitude and resistance. Action and the public happiness that comes with it, Arendt suggests, is not motivated by the likelihood of achieving a specific goal: here, ends and means are not separated, as they are in utilitarian perspectives. Rather, the activity itself is the goal. What the poet and the historian praise when they look at past action is not the outcome but the spontaneity, the human freedom to begin, that is displayed in the activity itself. In turn they see, and praise, the corresponding happiness actors feel when they appear with and to one another. The story of the defeated cause is the story of human beings together displaying their freedom, of spontaneity, and ability to insert themselves anew into the world. This in turn is a display of the reclamation of human dignity. And human dignity pleases Cato.

4. Conclusion

In light of our discussion of Cato the historian, it is interesting to note that while the story of the inveterate gambler is a metaphor for the inveterate actor, all of the examples Arendt uses in “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness’” are of human beings *looking back on* the times they appeared in public, recalling happiness from the position of a storyteller or historian. For example, regarding the ex-radical who told Arendt the story of the inveterate gambler, Arendt says: “I was curious how this particular person viewed his own

⁵⁰ Arendt, “Remembering Wystan H. Auden, Who Died in the Night of the Twenty-Eighth of September, 1973,” in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2018), 532.

⁵¹ Arendt had intended to call *The Human Condition* “Amor Mundi.” Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers correspondence, 1926-1969*, ed. Karl Jaspers, Lotte Köhler, and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 264. It is outside the scope of this article to discuss the possibility that other emotions, even those that we generally take to be very different from happiness—such as fear, anger, or grief—may be able to co-exist with public happiness. I leave this as an open and plausible possibility. Fear, anger, grief—Soueif mentions all of these emotions more than once as tied into the motivations of the protesters in Cairo during the Arab Spring. Soueif, *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). At least some of these emotions were also surely at play during the Hungarian Revolution. These other emotions are a reaction, they are negative emotions insofar as they react to, and are thus conditioned by, the way the world is. But the happiness that comes with appearing with and to others in public is positive, it corresponds to the freedom to appear with and to others, conditioned by natality and plurality. Fear, anger, and grief might bring human beings together in re-action, but public happiness is felt in free *interaction*. In the story of the inveterate gambler, too, there is both an unfreedom and a freedom: the wheel is crooked and the gambler can do nothing about that expect react. But the joy he gets from playing at the wheel is, Arendt says, so “intense,” that he stays to play, to interact. Just as *amor mundi* encompasses two seemingly opposing affects, resistance and gratitude, appearing in public may often encompass two or more seemingly exclusive emotions, such as anger (at the crooked wheel, at injustice) and happiness.

past, how he had come to terms with his former convictions.”⁵² The ex-radical is looking back on a life lived. Perhaps Arendt had expected the ex-radical to say that he had engaged in revolutionary action in order to bring about social happiness, in order to facilitate a better society for all.⁵³ Arendt had thought that the ex-radical would say that they participated in revolutionary acts *in order to* achieve a social happiness. In other words, she thought his answer would be in the register of utility. But looking back on their time as a radical, it rather seems to Arendt that they are pleased at the same things that pleased Cato. They are pleased that they lived out their human life as fully as they could, using their capacity for action. They played at the wheel and thus exhibited their freedom—their spontaneity—even though the wheel was crooked and the likelihood of winning (coming off better in a private sense) was low. When Arendt discusses Jefferson and Adams she also discusses them as two men looking back over their lives: “the story [of the inveterate gambler] reminded me instantly of a strange passage in the last letters exchanged between Jefferson and John Adams, when, at the end of their long lives and in a reflective mood, they felt the need to explain themselves to each other.”⁵⁴ It is worth noting that even as a spectator looking back over his life, Jefferson is involved in plurality, and feels the need to explain himself to Adams. Even the poet and historian are always already in relation with other human beings. Arendt says that Jefferson candidly admits that “life in Congress—the joys of discourse, of legislation, of transcending business, of persuading and being persuaded—was [...] conclusively a foretaste of an eternal bliss to come.”⁵⁵ Precisely how the relation between the public happiness of actors and the pleasure of historians is related is something Arendt does not flesh out.⁵⁶ Whereas the actor seems to feel public happiness in the moment they are acting with and appearing to others, the spectator feels a pleasure looking back over the action once the “game” has fully played out, and the outcome is known. Jefferson feels a pleasure in reflecting upon his past public happiness, which in turn was the affect that corresponded to the exercising of human dignity, of daring to act with and appear to and with others, even amidst likely defeat. The “privilege” of judging, of seeing the whole “game” and all the moves of the various actors in it is a privilege the actors do not have. What the difference between the public happiness of the actor and the pleasure of the spectator or historian entails remains unclear. Similarly, details regarding the ways in which the experience of the actor might be related to the experience of the spectator remain thin. But Arendt seems to be committed to the claim that even though actors may not always achieve all that they set out to achieve, they win one thing later in life: the privilege to look back upon their lives

52 Arendt, “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’” 204.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 206.

55 Ibid.

56 The lack of clarity in Arendt’s work regarding to how the actor and the spectator are to be related has led Ronald Beiner to argue that there are two theories of judgment in Arendt’s work, one that corresponds to the actor and one that corresponds to the spectator or historian. For Beiner, in 1970 “The emphasis [in Arendt’s work] shifts from the representative thought and enlarged mentality of political agents to the spectatorship and retrospective judgment of historians and storytellers.” Ronald Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Judging,” in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 91. Similarly, we do not get an explanation of how the public happiness of the actor is or is not different from the pleasure of the poet or historian who looks back on past action.

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and be pleased like Cato and Jefferson that they took the risk of spontaneously appearing with and to other human beings.