

I AM NOT ALONE: RETHINKING ARENDTIAN ACTION THROUGH KIERKEGAARDIAN IRONY

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ABSTRACT: This essay challenges the widespread assumption that Hannah Arendt's concept of political action precludes meaningful solitude. Drawing on Søren Kierkegaard's notion of irony, I argue that action, in Arendt's sense, requires not only plurality but also a preparatory solitude grounded in ironic distance. I suggest that both Kierkegaard's anxiety-ridden subject and Arendt's public actor share a natal stance toward the world—one that resists conformism and opens a space for genuine appearance. By placing Arendt in conversation with Kierkegaard, I recover an ironic, natal dimension within her *vita activa*—a mode of inwardness often eclipsed in dominant interpretations of her work. Rather than signaling a withdrawal from the public realm, this inwardness forms the hidden ground upon which meaningful political association becomes possible.

Bringing Arendt and Kierkegaard into dialogue—a pairing rarely made—reveals affinities deeper than typically recognized. Despite their temperamental differences, both exhibit a sustained attentiveness to the nature of disclosure. For Arendt, to act is to begin—to introduce the new into the world through speech and deed. For Kierkegaard, to live ironically is to hold one's identity at a slant: to resist the given, to refuse the merely inherited. Both involve risk. Both expose the individual (though in different ways and directions).¹ And both, crucially, are rooted in natality: the idea that one can begin anew, not from mastery, but from finitude.²

Kierkegaard's account of irony, especially as developed in *The Concept of Irony*, articulates a form of solitude that is neither resignation nor quietism, but rather a posture of critical distance from

¹ Closer phenomenological inspection (begun here) suggests that this appearance of “differing direction” is no less superficial than the oft-assumed lack of affinity between Arendt and Kierkegaard.

² Their apparent difference turns not on any ontic essence but on temporal emphasis. This essay aims to open space in which Arendtian natality and Kierkegaardian irony both appear as the creative ground where something new begins. The publicness and exteriority of Arendt's *vita activa* is found in her deliberate emphasis of this aspect of being human in *The Human Condition*. Whereas Kierkegaard's treatment deals more specifically with the conditions for the existential move he makes in *The Concept of Irony*. They are not two distinct descriptions of two different people, but two possible stages of being that could happen in one body at one time, many bodies at different times or even in one body at different times over time.

inherited identities and unexamined social roles. The ironist stands apart—not in apathy, but in anticipation. This inward estrangement is not yet action, but it is what makes action possible. It is, as Kierkegaard might suggest, a form of pre-political becoming: a stripping away of the conventional that prepares the self for authentic self-disclosure. In this sense, *irony becomes natal solitude*—a space where the self is both unsettled and readied for emergence. When read alongside Arendt, Kierkegaard's ironic inwardness appears not as the antithesis of political action, but as its condition: the space where a self first gathers sufficient freedom to appear meaningfully before others.

KEYWORDS: Irony; Action; Vita Activa

ARENDT'S *VITA ACTIVA*

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt famously elevates action as the highest of human activities—where one discloses oneself among others in a shared world. Unlike labor or work, action arises from plurality and is sustained by natality. When Arendt speaks of political action, she means something far richer—and more ancient—than what is typically associated with politics today (e.g., government policy, elections, or partisanship).³

Arendt's understanding of politics is deeply rooted in the Greek tradition, particularly the *polis* (city-state), where free citizens appear before one another to speak, act, and reveal who they are. Politics, for her, is not primarily about governance or administration; it is the space of appearance where individuals act in concert, disclose their unique identities, and initiate something new. It is a realm defined by:

- **Plurality:** the condition of distinctness within a shared world – each person is uniquely distinct from every other person;
- **Speech and action:** the means through which individuals reveal who

³ Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 14–16; Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3–5; Seyla Benhabib, “How to Read Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958),” *Columbia Law School: Critique 13/13*, March 4, 2020, <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/seyla-benhabib-how-to-read-hannah-arendts-the-human-condition-1958/>. Together, these readings reveal how the same Arendtian concept can be cast as expansive, anarchic, or embattled in the face of contemporary U.S. political culture.

they are, not merely what they are;

- **Natality:** the capacity to begin, to initiate, to bring something new into being;⁴
- **Freedom:** not private will or choice, but public expression of initiative among equals;
- **Unpredictability:** because action engages others, its outcomes can never be fully controlled.

She writes:

“Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created man, but men are a human, worldly product.” (*The Human Condition*, p. 7)

And later:

“The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together...” (*HC*, p. 198)

For Arendt, then, politics is not what rulers do, but what free individuals do together in public—through speech and action—where they appear before one another and are recognized as distinct, initiating beings. This is why she remains deeply suspicious of political systems that prioritize bureaucracy, violence, or the exercise of rule at the expense of action and appearance; these, she argues, depoliticize human life by reducing persons to functions or roles.⁵

ARENDT’S PLURALITY AND THE MISREADING OF COLLECTIVISM

Among Arendt’s interpreters, a persistent assumption endures: that to act, in her sense, is never a solitary affair. Political action, they posit, is by definition collective, visible, interactive.⁶ To appear and be seen by others is its lifeblood.

⁴ Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natalty* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), esp. chs. 1–5. Bowen-Moore treats natalty as a multifaceted principle—factual, political, and theoretical.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1970); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Together these works analyze how bureaucratic administration (control by nobody) the rise of mass society work to dissolves public freedom, erode the space for action, and depersonalize political life.

⁶ Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natalty* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989); Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah*

But what if this is only partly true? What if Arendt's conception of action—particularly in its most existential register—harbors a different kind of solitude: not one of alienation or apathy, but of ironic self-exposure and preparation?

The claim that political action is incompatible with solitude finds strong *prima facie* support in Arendt's work. "Action," she writes, "needs for its full appearance the presence of others." She further underscores the distinctive character of action when asserting: "Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man."⁷ As *zoon politikon*, the human being exists among equals, revealing itself in word and deed within the public space of appearance. Arendt is unsparing in her critique of withdrawal into the private or merely contemplative life.⁸ Thought may prepare action, but it cannot substitute for it. The polis, in her classical rendering, is a stage—and actors require spectators.

Yet this theatrical image may mislead. What matters is not the number of spectators, but the possibility of disclosure—the chance to be seen and heard in a space where freedom can appear. In this sense, solitude is not the opposite of action but one of its preconditions. It is the space in which the self gathers itself for appearance—where inwardness becomes readiness rather than retreat. Solitude, in this light, is not a withdrawal from the world, but a refusal to be unthinkingly absorbed into it.

Arendt herself gestures toward this possibility. Her reflections on Socrates, especially in *Thinking*, emphasize internal dialogue—the two-in-one that characterizes conscience.⁹ Socratic irony, she argues, was not merely rhetorical but existential: a mode of life that sustained a public stance of questioning. This ironic disposition, far from isolating Socrates, enabled him to appear meaningfully in the Athenian world. He was alone in public—not a recluse, but a singular presence.

Arendt, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). Each of these readings emphasizes the inherently plural, relational character of Arendtian action.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 22-23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16-17. She traces the tragic roots of this tendency to privilege *vita contemplativa* over *vita activa* in Western thought back to Plato and early Christianity.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, 1978).

KIERKEGAARDIAN IRONY AND THE MASK

Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*, originally written as a dissertation, offers a nuanced defense of irony as both an epistemic and ethical stance. For Kierkegaard, irony entails holding the world at a distance—not to negate it, but to liberate the self from its spell. The ironist is not a nihilist *per se*, but one who resists immediate identification with social roles, conventions, and inherited expectations.

The mask, in Kierkegaard's metaphor, is not a tool of deception but a form of existential protection.¹⁰ It allows the ironist to engage the world without being fully claimed by it. By holding inherited meanings and social scripts at arm's length, the ironist creates a space of inward freedom—a space where the self is not immediately absorbed into the roles it performs. In this sense, irony functions as a self-preserving concealment: not a refusal to appear, but a refusal to appear too quickly or too completely. His mask is not the negation of authenticity, but its condition.

Irony becomes a mode of inwardness—a covert resistance to the given. But this resistance is not mere negation; it clears space for something new. For Kierkegaard, irony suspends the taken-for-granted world from within, creating room to re-evaluate and creatively recompose one's commitments.¹¹

This stance, while often solitary, is not apolitical. Irony is the soil in which selfhood takes root—a separation that enables action rather than impedes it. Just as Arendt describes natality as the miracle of beginning, so too does Kierkegaard's ironic subject preserve the possibility of beginning otherwise.¹²

Both thinkers share a profound distrust of the crowd. Arendt's fear of mass society—where individuals lose the capacity for judgment—is mirrored in Kierkegaard's scathing portrait of the public, which he calls a “phantom” devoid of responsibility. Yet neither thinker advocates withdrawal.¹³ Their response is not

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 262-266. This is the key spot where the negating moment of irony is shown to be generative – it clears space for something new.

¹¹ Ibid., 326. “No genuinely human life is possible without irony.” Here he explicitly links irony to the possibility of living well, which is a constructive, enabling claim.

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.; Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 326.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 61,

disengagement but the cultivation of singularity: a mode of existence that precedes and sustains authentic appearance.

TO ACT ALONE: IRONY, IRRELEVANCE, AND FAILURE TO APPEAR

When read through Kierkegaard, Arendt's conception of political action takes on a more paradoxical shape. Action may require the presence of others, but its origin is irreducibly singular.¹⁴ The actor, like the ironist, must face the world as if alone—not because others are irrelevant, but because they must not determine the terms of one's appearance.

This is not heroic individualism, but a kind of existential discipline—a refusal to collapse into either private self-enclosure or public conformism. To act is to risk misunderstanding, to appear without guarantees, to initiate something whose outcomes remain unknowable. In this sense, the actor is always alone: alone in their beginning, alone in their responsibility, alone in the ironic stance that renders action possible. Arendt's concept of political action—as the potential result of natal originality and spontaneity—is firmly centered in the individual subject. Yet the conditions under which such action might be actualized are never secure; they remain, and perhaps must remain, in doubt.

The space of appearance—the very site in which a subject comes into being through speech and deed—is also the space where recognition by others can never be assured. The Greek term *phainomenon* may serve as a useful meta-concept here: it names the moment in which the self turns inward and, in doing so, risks being seen at all.¹⁵ This is no accident. For Arendt, action is not the assertion of a stable identity, but the disclosure of the “who”—a revelation that

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 8. The distinctly symbiotic, paradoxical, formula that makes action possible.

¹⁵ While Arendt does not use the Greek term *phainomenon* in *The Human Condition*, the concept can help clarify the ontological ground of her “space of appearance.” In classical Greek thought, *phainomenon* (from *phainein*, “to bring to light,” “to appear”) names not only what is visible but the event of appearing itself, always in relation to others. As Heidegger puts it, *phainomenon* is “that which shows itself in itself, the manifest.” This relational sense illuminates Arendt's *vita activa*: action and speech come fully into being only as they enter a shared world where they can show themselves to others. On this reading, the *space of appearance* is not a static stage but a dynamic field of mutual visibility, where reality is coextensive with public enactment.

depends on others, but cannot be controlled by them.¹⁶ One steps forth without assurance.

Existential ironists, in Kierkegaard's sense, may succeed in detaching themselves from the illusions of mass identity. Yet they remain entangled in the fragile conditions that make political solidarity possible. The very element that enables newness—natality, spontaneity, the refusal to be deduced from what came before—is also what renders community perpetually precarious. The freedom to act, to begin anew, is inseparable from the risk of misrecognition, misunderstanding, or isolation.

This is the tension Arendt does not resolve but names: to appear at all is to depend on others, and yet to appear authentically is to risk being misunderstood by them. Her actor is neither fully sovereign nor merely social; she is exposed. In this sense, Arendt's account of political action shares a deep affinity with Kierkegaard's notion of irony. Both resist the closures of system and identity. The Kierkegaardian ironist stands apart not to destroy meaning, but to expose its contingency—to remind us that every role can be unmade, every mask removed. The Arendtian actor enters the world not to impose, but to disclose¹⁷—to make visible what is otherwise hidden in the routines of the everyday.

Kierkegaardian irony, as “infinite and absolute negativity” – is a refusal to be easily reconciled with the given world.¹⁸ It is not critique aimed at reform, but a kind of spiritual homelessness: a stance that declines to take the existing seriously on its own terms. Yet even this homelessness discloses something essential about human becoming—that the self is not a finished product, but a task, a relation, an event. Likewise, for Arendt, the actor is never merely a bearer of identity, but a beginning in motion—a being who interrupts, who breaks open the predictable.

Importantly, both Arendt and Kierkegaard, preserve the difficulty of togetherness.¹⁹ Political theorist Bonnie Honig, drawing on Arendt and agonistic theory, argues in *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, that political action

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 114, 200–201, 205, 207, 211. Taken together, these make clear that the *who* is disclosed only with others present, yet it can't be fixed or fully determined by them.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 6.

¹⁹ Expressed both through Kierkegaard's mask and Arendt's inescapable and unassured plurality.

is not consensus but contestation. The actor and the ironist do not arrive at the agora with ready-made positions or shared ends; they arrive as disruptions.²⁰ They do not escape the need for others, but they explode the fantasy that plurality can ever be seamless or soothing. The space of appearance is noisy, unstable, and at times inhospitable—but it remains the only space where freedom can appear as action. The public realm, then, is not a refuge from inwardness, but its echo. Action, like irony, is a refusal to accept the given; it is the soul's revolt against false reconciliation.

By placing Arendt in conversation with Kierkegaard, I recover an existential dimension of action that affirms inwardness not as withdrawal, but as a condition for public freedom. The ironist is not outside politics, but a witness to its fragility—a reminder that authenticity must always risk not being seen at all before others. It is in that risk, that wager without guarantee, that Arendtian action finds its deepest kinship with Kierkegaard's ironic subject.

SOLITUDE AS POSSIBLE PUBLIC DISCLOSURE & THE RISK OF APPEARING

If action is not merely performance—if it is not bound exclusively to the visible stage of politics—then how might it appear? What counts as action when viewed through both Arendt's emphasis on natality and plurality and Kierkegaard's inward orientation through irony?

Arendt distinguishes action from labor and work not solely by its publicness, but by its capacity to initiate something new among others—something unpredictable, unrehearsed, and unrecoverable once begun. Action reveals “who” someone is, not “what” they are.²¹ And yet, this “who” must already be in formation prior to its appearance. Arendt insists on the necessity of plurality, but she does not fully account for the solitary, inner process by which a self

²⁰ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Bonnie Honig, “Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 215–235.

²¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179, 200.

becomes capable of such disclosure.²² Here, Kierkegaard's ironic subject becomes indispensable. His self is not forged through direct expression, but through a dialectic of concealment and inward struggle. The ironic stance does not merely pull away—it prepares. It holds the social world at a slant, refusing to be flattened by it. And out of that refusal, something may emerge: a leap, a rupture, an act.

If we take action to mean a beginning grounded in one's distinct position within the world, then it may assume many forms. It may erupt publicly as speech or protest. It may appear subtly, as when a teacher shifts tone to make space for a student's unexpected voice. It may remain latent for years, as the quiet, self-sustaining stillness that precedes moral clarity or existential choice. It may be the refusal to laugh when laughter is demanded, or the decision to break silence even when words will not be welcomed.

These moments do not share a surface structure, but they share something deeper: each is a disclosure, made possible by a relation to one's own uniqueness and distance from the crowd. Each bears the mark of natality—something new begins—and each arises from a subject who has held themselves apart long enough to discern what it means to appear truthfully.

Arendt and Kierkegaard, read together, remind us that action is not exhausted by the political rally or the dramatic ethical gesture. It is not always theatrical. Sometimes it arrives awkwardly, obliquely, or only in retrospect—unpredictable in its timing and unrecoverable once it passes. It does not require applause. What it requires is a soul willing to risk beginning again—and a world, however fragile, willing to receive that beginning.

In this juxtaposition of Arendtian action with Kierkegaardian irony as a mode of being, we uncover a vision of political action that honors both plurality and inwardness. The conventional reading—that one must be with others to act—is

²² Michel Henry's phenomenology of life offers a temporal and ontological antecedent to both the ironic stance in Kierkegaard and the space of appearance in Arendt. For Henry, auto-affection names the pre-intentional self-revelation of life to itself—a pathos irreducible to any worldly mediation. Before ironic distance can negate inherited identities (Kierkegaard) or public action can disclose a “who” (Arendt), there is already a living self capable of being affected by its own existence. This affective immediacy is not yet public, yet it is the hidden ground from which both natal solitude and public freedom draw their possibility. See Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).

only half true. One must also stand apart: must resist the flattening pull of the crowd, must cultivate the ironic stance that prepares the self to speak and act freely.

Arendt's actors are not mere performers seeking recognition. They are natal beings—thrown into a world not of their making, yet capable of initiating something new. Kierkegaard's ironists are not disengaged critics, but inward agents whose solitude becomes the womb of possibility.²³

To act, then, is not simply to be seen. It is to appear—as oneself, against the grain, in the ironic light of freedom. It is to risk the solitude of beginning—and in doing so, reveal that one was never merely alone – maybe. Their solitude is not isolation, but possible origin. Their irony is not cynicism, but preparation (for something). They are, in Arendt's terms, “inserted into the human world by the fact of birth,” and that insertion carries with it both the burden of solitude and the promise of renewal.²⁴

To act, then, is not only to begin, but to begin in defiance — defiance of misunderstanding, of exposure, and of the silence that so often meets the new. Such defiance is not bravado, but the ironic disposition itself: the Kierkegaardian distance that frees one to appear, and the Arendtian courage that makes the appearance worth the risk.²⁵

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²³ Tillich's “courage to be” can be seen as Henry's immanent life stepping into the world, meeting death, finitude, and perspectivalness, and affirming itself within those limits. The act is not mastery over nonbeing, but the lucid acceptance of it — a life saying “yes” precisely where it knows it cannot prevail.

²⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176–77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5. How prescient and true are her words even today: “...this society does not longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won.”

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