Arendtian Memory and the Philosophical Foundations of Political Thinking

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The politics of temporality have recently become the subject of dedicated metatheoretical reflection. Postmodern political theory has raised a devastating challenge to modernity: it has exposed the weakness of the traditional foundational assumptions upon which political theorists have attempted to construct a viable philosophical justification for action. Metaphysical assumptions, once a commonplace point of departure for conceptions of the individual, freedom, truth, and politics, are no longer sound beginnings in the face of this criticism. They have been exposed as assertions that lack any sort of rational proof. Critiques of the metaphysical justifications that support basic political ideas highlight the difficulty of grounding political theory. Late modernity's awareness of the contextual, constructed nature of central tenets of Western political thought undermines foundational beliefs once held as objectively true. In the face of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, the existence of objective truth is called into question, and the possibility of understanding and articulating truth no longer seems possible.[1]

Without a defensible conception of truth in hand, the difference between the objectively true and the subjective cannot be demonstrated. This inability to ground theory in some defensible claim to objective truth has dangerous implications for political philosophy, if not for actual political action. In the face of Nietzsche's argument that morality is an artificial construct, and his conclusion that all normative claims are highly suspect, it would appear impossible to construct an effective grounding for political theory and action. It is equally untenable to disregard his criticism entirely; once metaphysics has been discredited, its viability as a foundation for political philosophy is at best highly problematic, and the need for a new foundation emerges.

As the example of Nietzsche shows, the attack on the foundations of political thinking is rooted in a deeply temporalized mode of thinking. Like Nietzsche's genealogical excavation of the origins of moral and normative principles that present themselves as natural and self-justifying, critiques of foundational assumptions often expose their subjective origins. In showing how morality is the product of a conscious creative process, Nietzsche destroys the credibility of existing claims to the existence of objective moral truth.[2] By demonstrating that the values we hold as products of objective moral truth are not actually objective and that the entire notion of objective morality is merely a construct, he calls into question the existence of objective truth writ large. An historical perspective is necessary to see the subjective origins and creation of foundational claims.

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[1] A paradigmatic account of this problematic is Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979). Lyotard gives an extremely brief definition of postmodernity in the introduction, defining "*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."

[2] See particularly Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 14-36.

This sort of temporal thinking has serious implications for how theorists evaluate initial normative claims. If our basic political principles represent particularized and contingent interests rather than an objective and universal truth, they are open to empirical attack from historically-marginalized people whose experiences and interests are excluded from that foundational narrative. Such critiques challenge theorists to actually prove that the foundational ground from which they proceed does in fact exist; thus far, none have adequately responded to this challenge.

It is my contention that theory must adopt a temporal perspective to respond to this temporalized attack on foundations. To that end, this paper will trace the linkages between collective memory and political authority in Hannah Arendt's discussion of constitution and foundation to evaluate temporal reflection as the basis of an alternate theoretical justification. For Arendt, authority is initially established by the act of founding a political body, but this act cannot grant the stability that politics requires. Political stability requires collective remembrance of the action. This paper explores the implications of her claim that political authority in the present rests on the memory of the past. Through this analysis of Arendt, I will argue that the role of memory in preserving the political authority of the founding act suggests possible resources for the philosophical foundations of political theory. But as Arendt cautions in *On Revolution*, memory is inherently ephemeral. Without some memory of the act of foundation, it is as though it never occurred.

In short, for Arendt, memory works with and against authority. To unravel this tension, the paper will begin by explicating Arendt's account of authority and foundation in *On Revolution*, "What is Authority?," and "What is Freedom?." I will then turn to her discussion of constitution, the specific political activity that founds the public sphere in Arendt's account of modern authority, to suggest the political stakes of her account of authority. As deployed in *On Revolution,* constitution and foundation draw together action and remembrance to convey an account of political freedom. This account introduces distinctions between power, authority, law and violence, from which the *political* specificity of freedom emerges. My analysis of constitution will link the general question of justification more firmly to its political content. Insofar as they draw together and reveal relationships between action, remembrance, authority, power, law, and violence, constitution and foundation provide another way of reading the specificity of the political through the question of political freedom. Finally, I will use the ambiguity of memory in Arendt to assess the limits of temporal thinking for theoretical justification. The ultimate question this paper seeks to address is whether we can theorize politics on a foundation susceptible to failures of memory. Following Arendt's proposal in *The Human Condition* to "think what we are doing" as a way of reconsidering human existence in light of late-modern challenges, I will suggest that philosophical foundation, like political foundation and theory itself, is best understood as an ongoing activity.[3]

Authority and Foundation

Arendt begins "What is Authority?" with a startling claim. The question of authority, she contends, can only be asked in the past tense, since 'authority' as she defines it no longer exists in the modern world. The essay, then, aims to explain what authority *was*. The connection that Arendt draws between freedom, action, and politics allows her to contend that

[3] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 5.

both liberty and authority are declining in the modern world.[4] Arendt's argument describes a historically-specific, temporalized conception of authority, which she contends has vanished both from the modern world and from our ability to conceptualize it.[5] The breakdown of authority in the modern age is tied to the loss of tradition and belief, which formerly served as a guide to the past that directed the approach to the future, and is posed as the foundational political problem driving the "decline of the West."[6] For Arendt, the concept of authority is tied to a particular set of historical circumstances and a particular form of political life: it emerges in Rome as a product of an attempt to universalize reason as the external basis of obedience, an endeavor that separated thought and action and established a firm hierarchy between them.[7]

Rather than seeing authority as a timeless, immutable fixture of political life, Arendt's account of authority contends that it is subject to the vicissitudes of human history. Changes in the material, social, and political fabric of human life, such as those accompanying industrialization and the rise of mass society, impact the role that authority plays in politics dramatically.[8] The transition away from the forms of political action characteristic in Rome coincided with the disappearance of authority. The temporal sensitivity that Arendt's analysis of authority displays is elemental to her general theoretical stance, and pervades her analysis of revolution, and its constituent parts, foundation and constitution. This section will analyze the connection between the concrete event of foundation and the ephemeral authority it brings forth in her study of revolution. This analysis will highlight the crucial yet unreliable role that memory plays in linking historical events to the basic normative claims that support political life in common.

Arendt's unique reading of revolution is shaped by her observation that "the Americans would still have agreed with Robespierre on the ultimate aim of revolution, the constitution of freedom, and on the actual business of revolutionary government, the foundation of a republic."[9] She presents this reading of revolution in contrast to the historian's focus on the act of rebellion. Arendt's analysis of revolution shifts the conceptual focus of revolution away from the violent act of liberation to its political content. In doing this, she draws a distinction between liberation and freedom, which prior historians of revolution had failed to do. Related to this distinction is a crucial series of distinctions between authority, power, and violence. Secondly, this passage displays the conceptual positioning of constitution and foundation within her understanding of revolution. The acts of

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[4] Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin, 2006) 100.
[5] Ibid., 92.
[6] "For if I am right in suspecting that the crisis of the present world is primarily political, and that the famous "decline of the West" consists primarily in the decline of the Roman trinity of religion, tradition, and authority, with the concomitant undermining of the specifically Roman foundations of the political realm, then the revolutions of the modern age appear like gigantic attempts to repair these foundations, to renew the broken thread of tradition, and to restore, through founding new political bodies, what for so many centuries had endowed the affairs of men with some measure of dignity and greatness." Ibid., 140.
[7] Ibid., 115.
[8] Arendt's famous account of the 'rise of the social,' to which I am here alluding, is itself the subject of a great deal of interpretive and critical attention. See Malcolm Bull, "The Social and the Political"; Michel Freitag, "The Dissolution of Society within the 'Social'"; Kirstie McClure, "The Odor of Judgment: Exemplarity, Propriety, and Politics in the Company of Hannah Arendt" and "The Social Question, Again"; and Hannah Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*.
[9] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*. (New York: Penguin, 2006) 132.

foundation and constitution are the bedrock of her discussion of revolution. The act of founding a republic, the task with which revolutionary government is charged, confers authority on government but introduces an uneasy tension between active participation and representation. The act of constitution, as the aim of revolution, consists in the formation of political freedom. Arendt argues that, properly speaking, "the appearance of freedom…coincides with the performing act" and that "the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action."[10]

Arendt raises the question of authority in the context of 'the problem of an absolute', which it obscures "the most elementary predicament of all modern political bodies, their profound instability, the result of some elementary lack of authority."[11] Absolutism, in her understanding, was the attempt to solve the problem of authority without making recourse to a new foundation. The inherent impermanence of authority plays a central role in Arendt's analysis of historical phenomena, such as the rise of absolutism and the French and American revolutions. The occurrence of revolution reveals a prior failure of authority: "the very emergence of revolution on the political scene as event or as threat [demonstrates] in actual fact that [the existing political] tradition had lost its anchorage, its beginning and principle, and was cut adrift."[12] Successful revolutions therefore culminate in a new beginning, in which authority is once again established through the act of founding a new political body.

For Arendt, authority and power are related, but distinct, phenomena. As Arendt defines it, "power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another."[13] The act of foundation is an attempt to confer authority on the constitution of power and freedom of the new government. Unlike power, which existed prior to the American Revolution [and enabled the revolutionaries to act], authority is the means by which government is preserved after its constitution and space for the experience of political freedom is maintained. Authority preserves the stability necessary to create a world where political freedom might appear, and emerges out of the historical moment of foundation. For this moment of foundation to occur, power must exist: "where and when men succeed in keeping intact the power which sprang up between them during the course of any particular act or deed, they are already in the process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action."[14] Authority projects the stability of this structure into the future.

Arendt defines violence in similarly phenomenological terms, but draws a sharp division between power and authority, both of which allow politics to occur, and violence, which stifles politics. Violence, Arendt claims, destroys power, and given the connection between power and authority just described, also destroys authority. Unlike power, violence is incapable of speech. Because speech gives shape to the appearances of human action in the political realm, the speechlessness of violence marks it as a distinctly antipolitical phenomenon:

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[10] Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin, 2006) 145.
[11] *On Revolution* 151.
[12] *OR* 153.
[13] *OR* 166.
[14] *OR* 166.

> Great and significant as these insights are, their political relevance comes to light only when it has been recognized that they stand in flagrant opposition to the age-old and still current notions of the dictating violence, necessary for all foundations and hence supposedly unavoidable in all revolutions. In this respect, the course of the American Revolution tells an unforgettable story and is apt to teach a unique lesson; for this revolution did not break out but was made by men in common deliberation and on the strength of mutual pledges.[15]

Unlike the French revolutionaries, who conflated violence and power and thus could not establish authority, the Founders focused on the act of founding and constituting a new government in concert.

Power, unlike violence, is a public phenomenon, and thus requires constitution and institutionalization. Since power exists only when people join together to take action, publicity is an essential element of the phenomenon of power. This public and ephemeral view of power is intricately connected to the possibility of action. Power is the impetus and precondition of assembling for action. However, power is insufficient, by itself, to found authority. It is this distinction between power and authority that the American Founders could not and did not anticipate. Arendt locates the possibility and source of the foundation of new authority in this fact that the Founders did not know what they were doing when they set out to constitute their newly-won freedom. Foundation requires a combination of action and power, two contingent and ephemeral political phenomena that cannot be compelled by the desire to found a new polity:

> The grammar of action: that action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and the keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty.[16]

Arendt claims that the American revolutionaries turned to the foundation of power as a means of generating power to balance existing power. In her reading, the unique insight of the American Founders was their recognition that "power and freedom belonged together, that, conceptually speaking, political freedom did not reside in the I-will but in the I-can."[17]

The act of foundation is therefore a synthesis of the possibility provided by power and the direction given by action. This synthesis allows political action to emerge from the plurality characteristic of the human condition. Critically, the act of foundation does not guarantee any future consequences: it establishes a condition of possibility only. The temporal perspective Arendt brings to her analysis of revolutionary foundation emphasizes the contingency in any act of foundation. As the response to a failure of authority, revolution brings with it absolute uncertainty about what form the future will take: "the revolution – so at least it must have appeared to these men – was precisely the legendary hiatus between end

[15] *OR* 206.
[16] *OR* 167.
[17] *OR* 141.

and beginning, between a no-longer and a not-yet."[18] Foundation is the act that serves as this beginning and brings about the not-yet. However, this not-yet requires action to come into being, and this action cannot be compelled.

Foundation grants authority because the act reveals the capacity of the actors for beginning anew. Natality, the uniquely human ability to begin anew, allows for the act of foundation:

> What matters in our context is less the profoundly Roman notion that all foundations are re-establishments and reconstructions than the somehow connected but different idea that men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners, that the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.[19]

By this logic, Arendt claims that the Preamble to the Declaration is the sole source of the Constitution's authority as law of the land, since it represents an attempt to answer the problem of the absolute with "divinely informed reason" in the context of a constitution that disclosed itself only in its construction and not before. The only 'absolute' possible in politics "lies in the very act of beginning."[20] In Arendt's eyes, the great wisdom of the American revolutionaries lies in their decision to see themselves primarily in their capacity as founders, which shows a fortuitous awareness that authority can only be conferred through an act of foundation. Thus it is the novelty of the claims advanced in the Declaration, rather than their actual merits as truth claims, that grant authority on the Constitution.

The foundation of authority in the political realm is conditional on the actions of individuals that occur when the plurality of humanity experience power. It cannot be predicted, nor directed from without, nor compelled, and once established, this authority is in constant danger of disappearing. The human capacity for natality means, however, that the potential to found authority anew is innate. The exercise of natality, though, requires the creation of a space where power, freedom, and action might come into existence. The creation of such a space is the task of constitution.

Constitution

If the act of foundation establishes the authority of the body politic, the act of constitution fulfills the ultimate goal of revolution: the practical establishment of the form political freedom will take. Arendt's discussion of constitution begins with several distinctions. First, she distinguishes herself from the reactionary interpretation of constitutions and the "fever of constitution-making" that the historian of revolution gives. For the historian,

> the Constitution of the United States, the true culmination of this revolutionary process, is understood as the actual result of counter-revolution. The basic misunderstanding lies in the failure to distinguish between liberation and freedom;

[18] *OR* 197.
[19] *OR* 203.
[20] *OR* 196.

> there is nothing more futile than rebellion and liberation unless they are followed by the constitution of the newly won freedom.[21]

By contrast, Arendt views constitution not as that which ends the revolution, but as an act of arranging political freedom after the failed authority and power of the old order has been swept away, which preserves the possibility of exercising that freedom.

After drawing the distinction between liberation and freedom, which associates the act of constitution with the formation of freedom and thus the goals of revolution, Arendt moves to the novelty of the US Constitution. What is new in the American Constitution is the way it locates and addresses the danger power poses to freedom. Both the American revolutionaries and 19th and 20th century constitution-makers distrusted power as such. However, later revolutionaries failed to recognize two things: first, that the act of foundating a republic is of paramount importance, and second, that the Constitution does not safeguard civil liberties, but instead establishes an entirely new form of power.[22] Tyranny of the majority, in addition to the possible abuse of government power, was the additional threat to liberty that the American Constitution was made to address.

The underlying notion of power from whence this concern emerged led the Founders to move away from a focus on simply limiting government in their constitution-making. Instead, their task became one of founding a new government where the rights of individuals "were assumed not to indicate the limitations of all lawful government, but on the contrary to be its very foundation."[23] With this intention, constitution became an act that situated the 'grand temple of federal liberty' within the foundation of correctly distributed power. In thinking through the problems surrounding this foundation and the needs of government in their spatiotemporal location, the limitations of limited government became apparent. The centrality of the foundation of power, rather than limitation of government power, is the main difference between US and subsequent European revolutions. Thus, Arendt claims that the "true objective of the American Constitution was not to limit power but to create more power."[24]

In her analysis of revolution, however, the connection between constitution and the foundation of the authority that grounds liberty and power remains problematic. The decline of the "revolutionary spirit" in America after the initial act of constitution provides an example for why this is so. The loss of this spirit is a result of the very constitution which was intended to safeguard the possibility of political freedom and action: "It was in fact under the impact of the Revolution that the revolutionary spirit in America began to wither away, and it was the Constitution itself, this greatest achievement of the American people, which eventually cheated them of their proudest possession."[25] Intended to preserve the realm of opportunity for political action into the future, the Constitution instead made it possible for citizens to retreat entirely from politics into private material interests.

The act of constituting freedom after revolutionary liberation is inescapably plagued by an internal tension, which is exacerbated by persistent misunderstanding of 'constitution'

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[21] *OR* 133.
[22] *OR* 138.
[23] *OR* 139.
[24] *OR* 145.
[25] *OR* 231.

as a political phenomenon. To have any significance, the freedom gained in an act of revolutionary liberation must be constituted, but constitutional government itself simply means that government is limited by law. In creating a constitution, the founders "claim not a share in government but a safeguard against government."[26] The profound distrust of government that characterized the American founders caused them to misunderstand the purpose of their own acts of constitution. On Arendt's reading, the American Constitution's limitation of government power is not its most important feature. The Founders "failed to understand, on one hand, the enormous, overriding importance of the foundation of a republic and, on the other, the fact that the actual content of the Constitution was by no means the safeguard of civil liberties but the establishment of an entirely new system of power."[27] Seeing government power as intrinsically suspect led them to forget their most important insight: that power and freedom occur together. By representing power as a threat to freedom rather than as an essential prerequisite for any exercise of political freedom, the Founders severely diminished the possibility that later generations would be able to experience political freedom.

By Arendt's own understanding of freedom, authority, and action, however, constitutions cannot guarantee that citizens will engage in political action. Indeed, the tension between protecting the possibility of freedom and constituting a stable, lasting polity is one that no constitution could possibly resolve. Arendt points out that the Founders were cognizant of the fragility of the revolutionary spirit:

> What [Jefferson] perceived to be the mortal danger to the republic was that the Constitution had given all power to the citizens, without giving them the opportunity of *being* republicans and of *acting* as citizens… all power had been given to the people in their private capacities and there was no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens.[28]

This flaw in the Constitution, necessitated by accession to the demands of stability and the practical constraints of the republican form, is what Arendt points to when she claims that "the spirit of revolution… failed to find its appropriate institution" and thus the space in which political freedom might appear has been lost.[29]

It appears, then, that preserving the possibility of political action and freedom is nearly impossible, but Arendt holds out one final means by which the gains of revolution might be rescued from ruin: memory. After the spirit of revolution failed to find its appropriate institution "there is nothing that could compensate for this failure or prevent it from becoming final, except memory and recollection."[30] The next section will take up Arendt's account of the potential for preserving authority that memory carries, and assess the ambiguity of the role that memory plays vis-à-vis authority and foundation.

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[27] *OR* 138.
[28] *OR* 145.
[29] *OR* 272.
[30] *OR* 272.

Authority and Memory

As the preceding analysis indicates, constitution, foundation, and authority are not secure in their ability to project themselves into the future. All three are subject to the same vicissitudes of historical contingency that characterize the world of human action. The problem of authority is addressed by the act of foundation, but this act is insufficient to grant the stability that politics requires. Stability requires remembrance. Remembrance works here on two levels. First, the Founders' memory of the ancients, in concert with their experiential recognition of the need to constitute and found anew, provides a model for their action. Here, I wish to stress that for Arendt, the accuracy of historical memory is less important than the actions enacted on the basis of the collective perception of historical events. Secondly, as Arendt points out with action more generally, without memory of the act of foundation, it is as though it never occurred. Politics requires the construction of a worldly space with enough permanence to serve as a space for the possible experience of political freedom and action. The unreliability of remembrance works with and against the revolution.

Arendt's analysis of the American founding emphasizes the strong influence that the memory of the Roman republic, a central element of the founding generation's historical imagination, had on the path they blazed through liberation to constitution. The Roman model, which "suggests that the act of foundation inevitably develops its own stability and permanence" and sees authority as "nothing more or less than a kind of necessary 'augmentation' by virtue of which all innovations and changes remained tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment," inspired the Founders' solution to the impermanence of their foundational action.[31] For Arendt, "the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented."[32] The connection that the founders drew between preservation and augmentation – which again emphasizes the central role of our innate capacity to make new beginnings in Arendt's understanding of authority – was inspired by their own collective memory of the importance that foundational acts and continual augmentation played in preserving authority for the Romans.

Memory's ability to inspire new beginnings is, in large part, the reason it plays such a large role in Arendt's analysis of revolution. As a means of establishing and preserving authority, historical memory matters as a spur to action. This intimate connection between the contemplative dimension of memory and the intersubjective, public enactment of political action that it spurs recalls Arendt's exhortation in *The Human Condition* to "think what we are doing."[33] I will return to this bond between thought and action in my consideration of the lessons Arendtian authority, foundation, and memory offer to the search for firmer philosophical foundations.

The second crucial function of memory in Arendt's analysis of authority is to preserve authority after an act of foundation. The durability of the memory of the American founding and the notion of the Constitution as a foundational document, she claims, gives stability to the American republic even as actual events logically challenge its cohesiveness and ability to ground the body politic. However, Arendt's unwillingness to define freedom, action, and power in terms that guarantee their existence in the future carries over into her view of the limitations of memory. The unreliability of memory, together with the failure to properly

[31] *OR* 194.
[32] *OR* 194.
[33] *The Human Condition*, 5.

institutionalize freedom through the Constitution, allows the loss of the possibility of politics: "what was lost through the failure of thought and remembrance was the revolutionary spirit."[34]

This failure of memory and institution allows for the transformation of politics from the place where political freedom and action might occur to a democratic form of rule in which Arendt's famous 'social question' is paramount:

> What remained of them in America, after the revolutionary spirit had been forgotten, were civil liberties, the individual welfare of the greatest number, and public opinion as the greatest force ruling an egalitarian, democratic society. This transformation corresponds with great precision to the invasion of the public realm by society; it is as though the originally political principles were translated into social values.[35]

After the revolutionary spirit was forgotten and democracy and rule replaced constitution, foundation, and political freedom as the concerns of politics, public happiness becomes a question of freedom from politics rather than the ability to act in the political realm. To maintain such a government "the defenders of this system… must insist that politics is a burden and that its end is itself not political."[36] This reversal of the popular conception of freedom, though enabled by the failure of the constitution to build an institutional home for that freedom, is nevertheless only possible once the people forget the original, active view of political freedom central to the revolutionary spirit.

In Arendt's analysis, the failure of the Constitution to formalize the system of wards that Jefferson considered, the rise of party politics, and the inherent tension within representative democracy destroyed the space of politics after the memory of the revolutionary spirit vanished. On Arendt's view, individuals experience, rather than possess, political freedom. The main task of constitution is to preserve the possibilities for experiencing political freedom created by revolutionary liberation, since

> Freedom, wherever it existed as a tangible reality, has always been spatially limited. This is especially clear for the greatest and most elementary of all negative liberties, the freedom of movement… Freedom in a positive sense is possible only among equals, and equality itself is by no means a universally valid principle but, again, applicable only with limitations and even within spatial limits.[37]

The main failure of the American Revolution was its inability to build political spaces to house the ideal of freedom that initially motivated the revolutionary drive for liberation. The persistent, albeit idealized, memory of the foundation, enacted in public discourse and the sphere of political action, and the authority it grants represents the most historically successful dimension of the revolution.

Thus for Arendt, the primary failure of the American Revolution was its failure to constitute freedom in any specific institutional space, but this failure only resulted in the

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[34] *OR* 212.
[35] *OR* 213.
[36] *OR* 261.
[37] *OR* 267.

disappearance of the 'treasure of the revolution' after the revolutionary spirit was forgotten. Though the capacity for public action may yet remain, the ascension of democratic party politics and the priority on rule and administration it entails mean that this action is no longer political, since it is motivated by the concern for limiting government and protecting private interests. The encroachment of the social into the lacuna left by the forgotten revolutionary spirit means that political action has acquired the character of a burden in the mass imagination, and is no longer associated with freedom. In light of the mixed results of even the most successful revolutionary constitution and foundation that Arendt analyzes, *political* freedom appears as a rare phenomenon. Political freedom requires that the spatial threshold of a public space in which political action may occur be complemented by the memory of the revolutionary spirit in which that space was originally constituted. The possibility of freedom only disappears after the idea of freedom fades from the collective national memory.

The preceding account of the relationship between memory and authority demonstrates the fundamental contingency that Arendt accepts in her basic political concepts. The final section will seize on this acceptance of contingency to sketch the benefits and limitations of temporalizing the foundations of political thinking.

Memory and the Philosophical Foundations of Politics

The preservative function of memory that ties a prior act of foundation to authority in the present puts an intriguing twist on the question of how we might establish theoretical foundations for political thinking. Arendt's response to the contingency of the world and the ephemerality inherent in her view of human action and memory is, I have argued, a key aspect of unraveling the tension around authority as a political phenomenon. I will now make the case that her acceptance of the contingency that accompanies a temporalized understanding of politics also suggests a number of insights applicable to the question of how theorists might better ground normative claims. Her stance toward the unsettled character of authority grounded on remembrance suggests the need to be cautious in mining her ideas for potential resources to adduce to the problem of philosophical foundations.[38] However, understanding memory as an active capacity, as Arendt's analysis indicates we should, suggests that we might productively view justification in similar terms.

First, Arendt's account of the connection between memory of a collective historical narrative and action bears an intriguing descriptive affinity to Nietzsche's tale of the path that norms and moral values take after their initial creation. Both emphasize that the initial act is essentially creative, and frame this ability to create as one of the central capacities of humanity. They diverge, of course, in their assessment of the impact that the memory of the creative act has on subsequent generations: Nietzsche sees the seamless naturalization of morality as one of the chief obstacles to moving beyond prevailing norms, while Arendt sees memory as the gatekeeper of political authority.

In considering the problem of philosophical foundations, however, it is their similar appreciation of the value of action and creation that matters. This implies that the authority of foundational normative claims comes not from their intrinsic correctness, but rather from the fact that in understanding that the origin of those claims lies in a human ability to bring forth

[38] See Dana Villa, "Arendt, Heidegger, and the Tradition," *Social Research* 74:4 (Winter 2007) for a discussion of how her project of recovery is not an attempt to recover a model for a process of reviving a particular mode of politics.

new beginnings, the memory of those claims might encourage future action and more active exercise of political freedom.

If, following Arendt, theorists accept a justification of initial normative claims grounded in the ability of the claimant to advance a unique set of claims, it would be wise to borrow other aspects of Arendt's theory of authority and foundation as well. Chiefly, her belief that action, freedom, and politics itself require publicity also applies to the advance of initial normative claims. It is this emphasis on the plurality necessary for political life that allows Arendt to redirect her study of revolution away from violence and claim instead that the defining feature of successful revolution is "the interconnected principle of mutual promise and common deliberation."[39]

A process of public justification applied to normative claims, complemented by the memory of the initial discovery of that claim, would meet two needs. First, it would fulfill a requirement implicit in the search for more solid foundations: the requirement that we be able to enact a theory upon that foundation that carries weight in a practical context. Second, and crucially when taking a contextual view of political norms, by subjecting foundational claims to the scrutiny that the memory of their active creation yields, we encourage theorists to dynamically maintain coherence between their foundational claims and the world they seek to describe and affect.

The theoretical limitation on foundational claims that accompanies this view of justification introduces a much higher level of contingency and fallibilism than the old metanarratives allowed. Foundational claims supported through an ongoing process of justification relinquish any claim to objective truth or universal applicability. Thus the prevailing basic norms at any given time might not correspond to the concrete reality of political life. I contend, though, that a provisional view of foundations more accurately reflects an intuitively plausible view of human history, which recognizes that basic normative principles change over time because new challenges constantly emerge in our interactions with one another. Insisting that the memory of the initial act of advancing a claim be a part of this process of justification preserves the recognition that all humans have the capacity to advance a claim of their own, and participate in the validation of existing foundations.

However, that caveat leads directly to the limits of applying the Arendtian view of foundation to the problem of philosophical foundations. As with the memory of political actions, constitution, and the founding of a polity, the awareness of the contingent and fallible nature of foundational normative principles rests on inherently unreliable memory, which cannot be guaranteed. This raises the strong possibility that this approach to justifying foundational claims might eventually also fail. However, by way of conclusion I would like to suggest that a minor modification of the way we consider 'memory' might paint a more optimistic view.

If, instead of seeing memory as tied to distinct events and historical narratives, we see memory as a faculty much like the capacity for natality, it is possible to imagine recovering the notion that foundational claims ought to be subjected to testing. As temporal creatures humans experience memory; the creation of new memories, the experience of correcting mistakes, and the perception of one's own past, present, and future cannot be avoided. Through the inevitable operation of the human capacity to create memories, then, and the awareness that we constantly create new understandings in our own minds and revise existing

[39] *OR* 206.

ones, we might be led to rediscover the insight that foundational claims were once brought into existence by an actor. From there, it is plausible to imagine reconstructing a process of justification similar to the one described above. To put the point slightly differently, the need to justify foundational claims might wax and wane with time, but because we are capable of giving and demanding justification, and because we experience and remember instances in which lower-order claims were called to account, the possibility that we could justify foundational claims cannot disappear entirely.