

# **Arendt on Action**

Work and the Human Condition: Winter 2009

## **I. The Three-Part Distinction, Again**

## **II. What Action Is**

## **III. What Action Has Become**

## **IV. Central Ethical Features**

# Labor, Work and Action

Three fundamental activities

Each corresponds to a fundamental given condition of human life on Earth.

## Activity

Labor

Work

Action

All Three Together

## Condition

Biological Life

Worldiness

Unnaturalness

Artifice — the Made  
World

Plurality

Natality and Mortality

## “Correspond” (co-respond)

(1) A response to (intelligent reaction; effect)

(2) A shaping of (cause)

**“Given” Conditions — Yet Shaped**

# What Action Is

## ***Political***

What we do together without intermediary

## ***Intertwined with speech***

speech explains and makes sense of deeds

## ***Responds to plurality (equal and distinct)***

We are ***equal*** to each other – need to interact with and respond to each other as equals

We are ***distinct*** from each other – need to bridge the gap of difference among us

## ***A beginning – responds to natality***

Unexpected, free, “ontologically rooted” in birth

## ***Boundless – Irreversible***

Begins but does not end – reverberates indefinitely

## ***Unpredictable***

What one person does is then responded to by others, who in turn respond, and so on

## ***Actors are not authors***

an action’s meaning depends upon later events

# What Action Has Become

## ***Politics Today: Acting as Making***

Focus on legislation, regulation, policy formation – the making of rules to channel people into predictable behavior

## ***Instrumental***

Means-end reasoning in political discourse

No discussion of the ends, only of whether proposed means for given ends are best

## ***Marginalized, Trivialized or Regularized***

“All very interesting – I *suppose*”

Scientific inquiry, dramatic arts, artistic appreciation, academic study, political protest

***or***

Transformed into predictable behavior – voting, campaigning, writing letters to the editor or to elected representatives, testifying

# Central Ethical Requirements

## ***Forgiving***

Because action is irreversible, boundless, and unpredictable, we need to forgive each other for what we do

Once done, a deed cannot be undone

Once done, a deed will continue to reverberate

A deed will come to mean something the actor did not intend

## ***Promising***

Because action is irreversible, boundless, and unpredictable, we need to bind ourselves with promises

Promising reduces unpredictability with commitment not conformity

Mutual promising, through contract, responds to the fact of freedom without sovereignty