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A fissure in the distinction

Hannah Arendt, the family and the public/private dichotomy

Abstract By way of an analysis of Arendt's defense of the public/private distinction in *The Human Condition*, this essay offers a re-interpretation of the status of the family as a realm where the categories of action and speech play a vital role. The traditional criterion for the establishment of the public/private distinction is grounded in an idealization of the family as a sphere where a unity of interests destroys the conditions for the categories of action and speech. This essay takes issue with this assumption and argues that the traditional conception has had a pernicious effect not only on women, but on men as well. This argument is supported by locating a fissure in Arendt's analysis of this distinction that suggests a profound structural affinity between the public realm and the family.

Key words Arendt · family · feminism · public/private

Ultimately, Carole Pateman asserts, the dichotomy between private and public is 'what the feminist movement is all about'.¹ Her contention: underlying the traditional, liberal political theory which clearly separates and opposes the public and the private, there lies 'an unequal opposition between men and women'.² Furthermore, under the beguiling 'egalitarianism' and 'ostensible individualism'³ of liberal theory, this basic prejudice has become obscured, indeed, camouflaged. However, feminist writers have increasingly exposed this prejudice and have thus challenged the unequivocal acceptance of the dichotomy between public and private. Vital to this critique has been an investigation into the nature of the family and the extent to which historically political notions such as justice may be applied to this traditionally strictly private realm.

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Susan Moller Okin focuses on this issue in her critique of traditional liberal theories of justice. Her assertion is that the family has been idealized by such influential theorists as Rousseau and Hume, and it has therefore been generally assumed that, 'the affection and unity of interests that prevail within families make standards of justice irrelevant to them'.⁴ It is precisely this 'affection and unity of interests' which has, at least in part, historically distinguished the private from the public.⁵ This idealization of the family is insidious because, to follow Okin, it denies the reality that family life encompasses much more than simple affection and is often characterized by violence and injustice.⁶ Thus, one side of the gender bias endemic to the traditional conception of the private/public dichotomy comes into focus; for by idealizing the family in this manner, the traditional conception denies the injustices that occur in this realm, often at the expense of its women and children members. However, the other side of this bias is frequently eclipsed; for the same denial of a diversity of perspectives in the family has often effectively excluded male family members from full participation in this traditionally female sphere. Therefore, such an idealization cuts both ways. By positing the family as the realm of necessity and by designating this as the proper realm of women, fathers are often sequestered from the joys and responsibilities endemic to the private sphere. On the other hand, by sequestering the categories of action and justice from the private realm, the traditional view ignores the fact that the family is a sphere where a variety of distinct voices are in play and, therefore, where standards of justice and accountability are vital. The sphere of the family, therefore, provides a particularly fecund *topos* from which to re-think the assumptions underlying the strict distinction between public and private. There is perhaps no other realm of human existence in which the 'unequal opposition between men and women' inherent to the traditional conception of this distinction manifests itself so clearly. In order to initiate this process of re-interpretation, I will attempt to elucidate the traditional distinction by focusing on the phenomenology of the public and private found in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. The clarity of her defense of this distinction and the peculiar status of the family found therein suggest the extent to which the traditional criteria underlying this distinction are phenomenologically untenable.

On the one hand, the status of the family in Arendt is clear: she explicitly relegates the family to the private realm and thus excludes it from the categories of action and speech. On the other hand, there seems to be another sense in which she speaks about the family that hints at a fissure in this strict and, for Arendt, vital distinction.⁷ In these passages, Arendt suggests that there is a certain, albeit always qualified, manner in which we may speak of a 'family world'.⁸ This is indeed remarkable considering that she explicitly thematizes 'worldliness' as an essential

characteristic of the *public* realm. She writes: ‘the term “public” signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.’⁹ The extent to which one may speak of a ‘family world’ in Arendt is, to be sure, quite limited, if even possible at all. However, an investigation into Arendt’s notion of the family, through an elucidation of both the public/private distinction and the nature of her twofold definition of the public sphere, may lend insight into the extent to which we may take advantage of this fissure in the distinction in order to ascribe a certain worldliness to the family. In this manner, I will offer the very un-Arendtian suggestion that the family is indeed a realm where action and speech are vital.¹⁰

The *polis/oikos* dichotomy

In *The Human Condition* Arendt begins her discussion of the public/private distinction by invoking the Greek understanding of the *polis* as opposed to the *oikos*, and she remains loyal to this ancient distinction throughout. Therefore, an adumbration of the Greek, and particularly Aristotelian, notion of the *polis/oikos* dichotomy provides the groundwork from which to investigate Arendt’s own conception of this distinction. The Greek notion rests upon the distinction between two levels of human association: the one political, formed for the sake of communal living, the other natural, concerned primarily with the daily needs of life. Arendt writes: ‘According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikos*) and the family.’¹¹ Aristotle asserts that there is an essential and irreducible difference between the household and the state.¹² The household, though a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of the *polis*, is a different level of association. For the household, ‘formed by nature for the daily needs of life’,¹³ has its end not in itself, but rather in the establishment of the *polis*, which ‘exists for the sake of living well’.¹⁴ However, the mastering of necessity is, in fact, the pre-condition for the freedom of the *polis*:

The realm of the *polis* . . . was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres [the *polis* and the *oikos*], it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the *polis*.¹⁵

Therefore, the *polis* itself is both distinguished from and grounded upon the *oikos* – the condition for the possibility of freedom and equality which characterize the realm of the *polis* is the *oikos*; for, according to Arendt, part of what it meant to be free was not to be subject to the

necessities of life.¹⁶ This freedom and equality were, however, explicitly denied to the realm of the household; for the head of the household was considered free only insofar as he could 'rise' from the 'shadows' of the private sphere and enter the political where all were equal.¹⁷

Labor and action

Arendt's entire discussion of the *vita activa* must be viewed against the backdrop of this model of the Greek *polis*; for her categories, or 'existentialia'¹⁸ of labor, work and action are presented as conditions characteristic of a specific realm of human existence. The identification of elements of the *vita activa* with their proper dwelling place may be elucidated through an investigation into the two existentialia of labor and action;¹⁹ for, here, Arendt clearly identifies the former with the private and the latter with the public. For Arendt, the 'existential' of labor is that element of the *vita activa* associated with the necessities of life. Here too, she appeals to the essentially Greek notion that '[t]o labor meant to be enslaved by necessity, and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life'.²⁰ Laboring is inherently endless; the living organism requires incessant care. Arendt writes:

The common characteristic of both, the biological process in man and the process of growth and decay in the world, is that they are part of the cyclical movement of nature and therefore endlessly repetitive; all human activities which arise out of the necessity to cope with them are bound to the recurring cycles of nature and have in themselves no beginning and no end.²¹

Labor, therefore, may be understood as the activity corresponding to the human condition of necessity and therefore may be identified with the private realm in which the management of life's 'daily needs' is essential.²² For Arendt, therefore, the activity of labor corresponds to the private sphere and must be distinguished from that activity which is unequivocally identified with the public realm: action.

Arendt begins her discussion of action thus: 'Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction.'²³ Equality is essential, for, without it, humans would be unable to understand each other; there would be no common ground upon which to meet. Distinctness, however, is itself vital, for, without it, neither speech nor action would be necessary for people to reach common understanding. Indeed, speech and action reveal the unique distinctness of the individual. This revelatory quality requires a space of appearance, a 'world' in which *who* an individual is may be disclosed through her/his words and deeds. This occurs 'where people

are *with* each other and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness'.²⁴ For Arendt, therefore, action requires a plurality of people existing together in equality; in other words, it requires a truly 'public' realm in the sense of the Greek *polis*. Arendt's appropriation of this conception of the 'public' must now be investigated in an attempt to clarify the status of the family within her conception of the public/private dichotomy; in this manner, the limited sense in which it is possible to speak of a family 'world' will come into focus.

The public realm

Publicity

As we have seen, for Arendt, the 'existential' of labor, embracing the basic condition of human necessity and thus corresponding to the private realm, and the 'existential' of action, characterized by freedom and equality and properly located within the realm of the public, remain consistent with the basic Greek distinction between the *oikos* and *polis*. For Arendt, there are two interrelated, but not identical phenomena characteristic of the 'public' realm. The first may be designated as 'publicity', the second as 'worldliness'. First, the public means 'that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody else and has the widest possible publicity'.²⁵ This conception of the public sphere is closely related to the Greek notion of the twofold function of the *polis*. According to Arendt, the Greek *polis* (1) 'was supposed to multiply the occasions to win "immortal fame," that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness'; and (2) 'was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech; for the chances that a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten, that it actually would become "immortal," were not very good'.²⁶ This definition of the public is profoundly connected with Arendt's conception of the 'glory' and 'greatness' endemic to all true action:

. . . action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique. . . . Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement.²⁷

Thus, as publicity, the public realm is the place of glory and greatness, the space where actions are recognized and affirmed. Indeed, it is the realm of immortality, where stories are told and remembered. However,

I tend to agree with Pitkin's terse and unequivocal critique of this understanding of the public:

But besides being obscure, this way of conceptualizing action is self-defeating. For, in the first place, action connected to nothing that precedes or follows it seems pointless and arbitrary. And, in the second place, the appeal to heroism and glory unconnected to any standard of right transcending the individual is bound to produce at best empty posturing, at worst, violence and war.²⁸

However, this first definition of the public, i.e. as publicity, though over-invested in the Greek conception of glory and greatness, retains its significance by pointing to an ineluctable difference between the public and the private. There is a certain breadth of reality inherent to the public realm conceived as publicity with which the private realm cannot and should not compete. The family is, by definition, excluded from this conception of the public; for the family, as a realm restricted to a limited number of members, is inherently a 'limited reality'.²⁹ Indeed, on Arendt's view, the extent to which we may even predicate 'reality' of the family is questionable; for 'appearance . . . constitutes reality'³⁰ and the family, strictly speaking, does not seem to be a realm of appearance for Arendt. An investigation into the 'worldliness' endemic to the public sphere will lend insight into this issue and suggest a different way of speaking about the public realm which may, to a certain degree, be applicable to the family.

Worldliness

On one level, Arendt clearly distinguishes the 'worldly' from the private: '[T]he term "public" signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.'³¹ However, the 'world' of which Arendt speaks does not designate the earth or nature, but rather the space which appears *between* people 'and in which everything that individuals carry with them innately can become visible and audible'.³² The 'between' characteristic of 'worldliness' may, in a certain sense, be understood materialistically. What Arendt has in mind is a situation not unlike a table around which a group of people sit. The table is precisely between the people, it separates and relates them at once.³³ Thus, 'betweenness' is related to the human artifact, the product of *homo faber*; for '[t]o live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common'.³⁴ However, this materialistic or objective description does not fully account for the deeper, less tangible conception of the 'between' as the proper space of speech and action. This Arendt calls the 'subjective in-between' and suggests by this a realm in which the

distinctive character of the individual may be revealed through her/his words and deeds.

Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between . . . so that most words and deeds are *about* worldly objective reality in addition to being *a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent* . . . this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the 'web' of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.³⁵

Thus, for Arendt, the 'in-between' which characterizes the public qua world has a twofold character, the one objective, corresponding to the condition of work, the other inter-subjective, corresponding to the condition of action.³⁶

However, there are two other vital characteristics of worldliness which must be elucidated. The first may be referred to as 'perspectival plurality', the second, as 'permanence'. With regard to the former, Arendt writes:

. . . the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects.³⁷

Action and speech derive their meaning from this aspect of the public realm; for as everyone sees and hears from a different position, speaking and acting with others attain true significance as the activity necessary for self-disclosure. Thus, the presence of 'innumerable perspectives' is a condition for the activities of speech and action and marks the second primary characteristic of the public qua world. Finally, with regard to 'permanence', Arendt writes:

If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men. Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible.³⁸

The world is marked by permanence; it is that which we enter at birth and that from which we depart at death. Thus, it outlasts our sojourn here. Arendt asserts that this permanence may be achieved only insofar as the common world appears in public: 'But such a common world can survive the coming and going to the generations only to the extent that it appears in public.'³⁹ The publicity character of the public realm mentioned above is vital to the achievement of world permanence for

Arendt; for it is this publicity that, through the centuries, absorbs and preserves what must be saved of ephemeral human activity.

Thus, this second definition of the public, that is, as world, encompasses three essential characteristics: betweenness, perspectival plurality and permanence. It is this second understanding of the public which may, to a certain extent, be appropriated to the realm of the family. Indeed, although Arendt defines the notion of the public qua world over against the first notion of the public qua publicity, she clearly views these two definitions as profoundly interrelated.⁴⁰ Therefore, to think the worldly nature of the public apart from its 'publicity' character is to truncate Arendt's description of the public sphere. It is, in fact, to think the public in a limited fashion. However, it is precisely this limited way of thinking about the public which opens up the possibility of rethinking the status of the family beyond the traditional framework; for there seems to be a certain sense in which we may predicate the three characteristics of the public qua world of the family. The extent to which this is in fact possible may be ascertained through an investigation into Arendt's brief and often tangential comments concerning the family.

The family

For Arendt, the term 'family', used almost interchangeably with the term 'household', designates a natural association which is inherently private. Indeed, not unlike the Greek *oikos*, the family both serves the life process and provides protection and refuge from the outside world of the public. In 'What is Freedom?' Arendt writes: 'the public realm stands in the sharpest possible contrast to our private domain, where, in the protection of family and home, everything serves and *must* serve the security of the life process.'⁴¹ Thus, Arendt's own understanding of the family, echoes the above discussed Greek conception of the *oikos*; for, like the *oikos*, the role of the family is to manage the life process. Closely related to this concern and care for the biological necessities of life is a second element characteristic of the family: to provide a safe refuge from the world.

Because the child must be protected against the world, his traditional place is in the family, whose adult members daily return back from the outside world and withdraw into the security of private life within four walls. These four walls, within which people's private life is lived, constitute a shield against the world and specifically against the public aspect of the world. They enclose a secure place, without which no living thing can thrive. This holds good not only for the life of childhood but for human life in general.⁴²

This aspect of the private realm is vital, for, on Arendt's view, the public realm, as the sphere of action and indeed work, does not concern itself

with the necessities required for the maintenance of human existence. Therefore, because she thematizes the public as the sphere of freedom which excludes the concerns of necessity, Arendt requires that the private realm be a place into which one can withdraw in order to tend to the necessities of life.⁴³

This place of calm, rejuvenating protection is the private sphere of the family. Indeed, for Arendt, the family inherently provides sanctuary from the world; for love is the mode of association endemic to it and love is intrinsically 'worldless'. She writes, 'Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others.'⁴⁴ For Arendt, passion and compassion naturally destroy the in-between because they have 'no capacity for generalization'.

Compassion, by its very nature, cannot be touched off by the sufferings of a whole class or people, or, least of all, mankind as a whole. It cannot reach out further than what is suffered by one person and still remain what it is supposed to be, co-suffering. Its strength hinges on the strength of passion itself, which, in contrast to reason, can comprehend only the particular, but has no notion of the general and no capacity for generalization.⁴⁵

Due to its passion, love is unable to sustain the plurality inherent to the public realm; for love knows only singularity, it abolishes distance and is therefore unable to provide the necessary universality and impartiality requisite for the establishment and maintenance of institutions.⁴⁶ 'Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world.'⁴⁷ Thus, love is essentially 'anti-political'⁴⁸ and must necessarily dwell in the private realm. As has been seen, the emergence of a space of appearance, the necessary condition for action and speech, is restricted exclusively to the public sphere. It is, in fact, love's decisive destruction of the in-between which sequesters the family from the world and thus, strictly speaking, denies the possibility of familial action and speech.

However, it is simply an idealization of the notion of love itself to attempt to argue that love destroys *all* distance and therefore the possibility of the emergence of a world between lovers. It is far more the case that love is only possible on the condition that an attempt ever again is made to traverse the distance, to meet the other as other, without attempting to assimilate and reduce the other's independent and unique perspective to one's own. Love is not reducible to passion and compassion because there is never a complete destruction of distance between unique individuals. Therefore, love always has a certain 'worldly' character to the extent that there always exists between two people a space of disclosure. Indeed, Arendt herself points to an essential affinity between the phenomenon of love and that of action:

For love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequaled power of self-revelation and unequaled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be.⁴⁹

It is precisely this element of self-disclosure built into the phenomenon of love that offers the possibility of speaking of the family as a realm of action and speech. Indeed, because the 'who' and the 'what' a person is are never, save in theory, completely separable, love itself is never entirely 'unconcerned to the point of unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be', rather, although the disclosure of *who* the loved one is takes on a primary significance in love relationships, the far more banal, but nevertheless important, disclosure of *what* the loved one may be is always already co-disclosed. It is an uncritical acceptance of the traditionally idealized model of the family to argue that in this realm love is the exclusive mode of self-revelation. To the contrary, I would argue that the family is a realm in which not only love but also action and speech are essential modes of self-disclosure, and therefore, that the family always has a certain 'worldly' character, because the space 'between' its members is never completely abolished.

The fissure

There are places where Arendt herself speaks of a certain kind of world with regard to the family. She writes:

As long as [love's] spell lasts, the only in-between which may insert itself between two lovers is the child, love's product. The child, this in-between to which the lovers *now are* related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they *will* insert a new world into the existing world.⁵⁰

This passage points to the possibility of taking advantage of a fissure in Arendt's strict distinction between the public and private, and, though perhaps not necessarily contradictory to her identification of the family with the private realm, it provides a path upon which to travel in the attempt to examine the extent to which Arendt's own language lends itself to the possibility of a conception of family which includes action and speech.⁵¹

Betweenness

Insight into this issue may be gained by recalling Arendt's second definition of the public, i.e. *qua* world; for perhaps the three elements of this conception – betweenness, perspectival plurality and permanence – may

be appropriated to the discussion concerning the possibility of a 'family world', and therefore, may be used as a basis for re-thinking the status of the family within the distinction between public and private. On Arendt's view, the birth of a child amounts to the insertion of an 'in-between' into the love relationship of the parents. This birth itself is 'in a sense, the end of love'.⁵² The significance of this comment is that the essential worldlessness endemic to love has, with the birth of a between, been destroyed. Thus, the condition of natality, a characteristic Arendt thematizes in the section concerning *action*, plays a vital role within the family as well. The birth of a child into a family has a twofold nature. On the one hand, '[h]uman parents . . . have not only summoned their children into life through conception and birth, they have simultaneously introduced them into a world',⁵³ and on the other hand, the child has, conversely, introduced a sort of world between the parents. To be sure, Arendt differentiates between the creation of a world and the beginning of a beginner:

This beginning [birth] is not the same as the creation of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.⁵⁴

However, insofar as the relationship between the parents was characterized by the essential worldlessness of love, the birth of their child may be considered the destruction of this worldlessness and the emergence of a world between them. Thus, not only is a child born into a world, but this birth itself signifies the birth of a world. The fact of natality seems to bridge the gulf between action and the family in *The Human Condition*; for action, as 'a beginning which corresponds to the fact of birth' and 'the actualization of the human condition of natality',⁵⁵ plays a central role in the realm of the family. Not only is the child born into a world, but more specifically, into a family. The family itself is the site of the 'startling unexpectedness' and 'infinite improbability' which is inherent in the birth of a beginner and endemic to the 'existential' of action.

The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.⁵⁶

Thus, on Arendt's own view, the essentially un-Arendtian notion that it is possible to predicate action, and by implication speech, of the family follows; for it seems that the insertion of a between into the love relationship marks the emergence of a familial world which is the condition for the possibility of speech and action. In fact, natality, as the actualization

of a beginning, may be considered the very paradigm example of action; for like all action, it is an activity by which an agent inserts herself/himself into the world. Ironically, it is Arendt's own idealization of love, by which all in-betweenness is destroyed in the love relationship, which forces her to stress the phenomenon of birth so strongly; and, in fact, this is precisely the site of the fissure in her conception of the public/private distinction. However, if one denies the idealization of love which entails a destruction of the 'in-between', the *requirement* of the birth of a child is no longer necessary to establish a familial worldliness.⁵⁷

Perspectival plurality

The extent to which Arendt's own analysis allows the 'world' to be predicated of the family remains to be seen. Thus far only the sense in which a between may be introduced into the realm of the family has been elucidated, without my mentioning the second and third characteristics of what Arendt designates as the 'world', namely, 'perspectival plurality' and 'permanence'. As has been seen, Arendt identifies the characteristic of 'innumerable perspectives' with the public realm and thus explicitly distinguishes it from the private.⁵⁸

This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying *family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one's own position with its attending aspects and perspectives*. The subjectivity of privacy can be prolonged and multiplied in a family, it can even become so strong that its weight is felt in the public realm; *but this family 'world' can never replace the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators*.⁵⁹

Thus, Arendt herself appears to accept a certain notion of a 'family world' in which a 'subjectivity of privacy' may be sustained. Her point seems to be that the reality of this 'world' is inherently 'limited',⁶⁰ and thus, strictly speaking, private; for it is opposed to the radical publicity which characterizes the truly public sphere. For Arendt, the 'family world' constitutes a limited reality precisely because it lacks a multiplicity of perspectives. Therefore, it may not be considered a 'space of appearance' in the strict sense of the term.⁶¹ For Arendt, reality understood as appearance to a plurality of perspectives, is explicitly excluded from the realm of the family in which there is only 'the multiplicity and prolongation of one's own position with its attending aspects and perspectives'. Although there is an undeniable truth to Arendt's assertion that the family, as a sphere limited to a certain number of members, has a finitude unknown to the public understood in its widest sense as 'publicity', the notion that the family is characterized by a single position

multiplied is both antiquated and phenomenologically false. Indeed, Arendt's position here echoes the idealization of the family so characteristic of traditional liberal political theory.⁶² This idealization seems to obscure the distinction between unity and identity; for, although the family may be unified by certain goals and interests, the position of any one of its members can never be identified with another.⁶³ Susan Okin puts it this way: 'however much the members of families care about one another and share common ends, they are still discrete persons with their own particular aims and hopes, which may sometimes conflict.'⁶⁴ This is the primary reason why action and speech must be existentialia applicable to the family. The notion that individuals in families retain their irreducible uniqueness justifies the attempt to import these two 'existentialia' into this sphere; for, even here, there is a variety (though, it must be granted, not an 'innumerable multiplicity') of perspectives, which hints at the wider sphere of relation that constitutes the public realm.⁶⁵ Just as members of the public sphere occupy distinct positions, so too do members of the family retain their irreducible uniqueness within the private sphere. Thus, the second aspect of Arendt's definition of the 'world' may, to a certain degree, be predicated of the family; and to take Arendt's vocabulary and appropriate it in a very un-Arendtian manner, the family may be spoken of as a space of appearance in which reality emerges as distinct individuals meet one another in all their similarity and uniqueness.

Permanence

Finally, with regard to the third aspect of Arendt's conception of 'world', i.e. permanence, the family, like the 'world', transcends the single lifespan of the individual. Thus, although, strictly speaking, the family is not 'erected' in the manner of the public realm,⁶⁶ it retains a continuity through the generations. In this way, the family, like the public sphere, achieves a certain permanence in which, indeed, stories handed down from parent to child, or grandparent to grandchild, continue to reveal the *who* of ancestors long since dead. And although these stories lack the glory endemic to those of the public qua publicity, they preserve no less the immortality of agents past and augment no less profoundly the 'web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together'.⁶⁷ However, it is precisely due to Arendt's over-investment in the public understood as 'publicity' that she sequesters the existentialia of speech and action from the family. By speaking of the 'family world' as a 'limited reality' in which the management of the life process is the primary function, Arendt herself, on the one hand, idealizes the family, thus concocting it into a calm and peaceful sphere of rejuvenation, which it in fact often precisely is *not*, and, on the other hand, denies the true

depth and significance of this sphere as a place of speech and action, a space of appearance in which reality unfolds. Nevertheless, according to Arendt's own conception of 'worldliness', there is a way in which the public and the private realms flow into one another; for, as has been shown, the three aspects that characterize the public qua world (i.e. betweenness, perspectival plurality, and permanence) may, to a certain degree, be ascribed to the family.

The family world

This analysis of the family provides the basis from which to begin re-thinking the status of the family beyond its idealization as a sphere exclusively dedicated to the care of life's necessities. It thus suggests a way to thematize the family beyond the either/or dichotomy imposed upon it by traditional liberal political theory. This vision of the family would therefore involve the phenomenologically more realistic view that families are associations between unique individuals in which the existentialia of action and speech and, by extension, the categories of justice and accountability play a vital role. Action and speech are central to family life because the two basic conditions of these 'existentialia' – equality and distinctness – apply to its members.⁶⁸ This need not, however, imply the complete destruction of the public/private distinction; for indeed, Arendt's analysis itself has indicated quite clearly that there is, at the very least, a quantitative difference between these two realms. However, it does call into question the traditional way of conceptualizing this distinction which has not only, as Pateman insists, had a pernicious effect on women, but has also had the effect of sequestering men from full participation in the life of the family. It is, therefore, not the distinction in itself which is necessarily to be denied – although it is unclear and beyond the scope of this essay to identify what precisely the benefits of holding this distinction in fact are⁶⁹ – but rather, it is the denial of one or the other sex from equal access to both spheres. By importing Arendt's conception of action and speech into the realm of the family, I have suggested the possibility of opening the borders between these two realms, which would in fact allow for the free passage of both sexes. It is only once this freedom of movement is established that women may attain access to traditionally male realms. However, equally important is the other direction of exchange; for males too will not only be held accountable for their *actions* in their families, but they will also be permitted to participate fully in the joys and responsibilities of this traditionally female sphere. Okin points to the vital importance of this opening of the borders:

Only when men participate equally in what have been principally women's realms of meeting the daily material and psychological needs of those close to them, and when women participate equally in what have been principally men's realms of larger scale production, government, and intellectual and creative life, will members of both sexes be able to develop a more complete *human* personality than has hitherto been possible.⁷⁰

The development of this 'more complete *human* personality' has been facilitated by a more complete *human* conception of the family which holds the tension between individual distinctness and common interest, thus affirming the importance of action and speech in this realm. It is only once the family is apprehended as a 'world' in which action and speech are essential 'existentialia', that it emerges as a realm in which both men and women may hold one another accountable and demand the freedom to participate in the full breadth of human reality. Hannah Arendt's political theory, though perhaps essentially opposed to such a conception of the family, illuminates a path for its development; for her attempt to maintain the strict distinction between public and private suggests the possibility of a different way of thinking about the family as a 'world' and thus as a realm in which action and speech are vital.

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Notes

- 1 (Pateman, 1983: 281).
- 2 (*ibid.*: 283).
- 3 (*ibid.*).
- 4 (Okin, 1989: 31).
- 5 Since the Greeks, an essential characteristic of the public realm has been the presence of a multiplicity of perspectives and opinions between equal members of an association. See (Arendt, 1958: 175 ff.), where Arendt discusses the role plurality plays in the condition of speech and action, a condition strictly limited to the public realm.
- 6 (Okin, 1989: 31).
- 7 This distinction is indeed vital for Arendt insofar as it underlies her critique of modern mass society. 'The emergence of society – the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices – from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen' (Arendt, 1958: 38). For Arendt, the cost of blurring the distinction between public and private is

the emergence of 'mass society' which replaces human action with 'normalizing' behavior. Cf. Notes 17, 24 and 70 below.

- 8 (Arendt, 1958: 57, 242).
- 9 (ibid.: 52).
- 10 This suggestion is not Arendtian because it is clearly contrary to Arendt's own definition of action which requires the element of glory endemic to a truly public space of appearance for its existence: action which does not appear in public is something other than action in Arendtian terms. See ibid.: 180. However, it will be argued below that although this element of glory cannot be a part of the private sphere, nevertheless, there are a remarkable number of structural affinities between Arendt's description of the public sphere and a non-idealized vision of the family which allow us to speak in terms of a 'family world', and, therefore, to import the conditions of action and speech into this realm. Once this has been accomplished, the categories of justice and accountability leak into the family from without, so to speak.
- 11 (ibid.: 24).
- 12 (Apostle, 1986: 1252a8–19).
- 13 (ibid.: 1252b13).
- 14 (ibid.: 1252b31). It is perhaps germane to mention that it is precisely a distinction between entities that have their end in themselves and those that do not which underlies Aristotle's description of the difference between natural beings on the one hand, and artifacts on the other. This distinction is at the core of the dichotomy between *physis* and *techne* in Aristotle's physical and metaphysical writings. However, an analysis of his discussion of the difference between change (*kinesis*) and activity (*energeia*) in Book 8(6) of the *Metaphysics*, (see Apostle, 1979: 1048a25–1048b37) should indicate the manner in which activity, which is a special mode of existence endemic to natural beings, is prior, although structurally related, to the notion of change which is particularly applicable to artifacts. Thus, the nature of life itself is thought in terms of activity in Aristotle. Therefore, by thematizing the *oikos* as that realm which has its end outside of itself, Aristotle, like Arendt and perhaps inconsistent with the arguments found in his metaphysical writings, sequesters the *oikos* from the category of action.
- 15 (Arendt, 1958: 50).
- 16 (ibid.: 32).
- 17 (ibid.: 32 and 38). Again, it is precisely the destruction of the strictly private sphere, in relation to which the truly public could be defined, which Arendt identifies as the insidious rise of the social, a realm in which the action endemic to the Greek *polis* has been replaced by mass behavior (ibid.: 38). Cf. Notes 7, 24 and 70.
- 18 (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1984: 197). I agree essentially with their claim that Arendt's categories of the human condition may be understood as 'existentialia' in the Heideggerian sense; i.e. 'they seek to illuminate what it means to be-in-the-world'.
- 19 Work, though a vital aspect of the *vita activa*, will be bracketed; for the question as to its proper realm is rather sticky. Arendt seems to speak of

homo faber as both a 'world'-builder (Arendt, 1958: 151), and therefore, in a certain sense, political, *and* as concerned primarily with objects and their utility and therefore, 'strictly speaking, unpolitical' (ibid.: 208). It should be pointed out, however, that the amphibious nature of work could itself be exploited to the advantage of an interpretation which attempts to import the notion of action into the realm of the family. This would be especially fecund if related to Aristotle's notion of *energeia* (itself related to *ergon* – work) which is fundamental to the development of his conception of activity. Cf. *Metaphysics* 8 and especially *Nichomachean Ethics* (Apostle, 1975: 1167b34–1168a30), where Aristotle thematizes childbirth as a sort of work and therefore implicitly relates it to the notion of *energeia* – that is, we find a similar fissure in the distinction in Aristotle, ironically also surrounding the issue of the birth of a child. (For this aspect in Arendt, see below, page 94 ff.).

20 (Arendt, 1958: 84).

21 (ibid.: 98).

22 Thus, Hanna Pitkin writes of Arendt's position: '[The household] was the proper place for labor, for activities "related to the maintenance of life" . . . just as the more direct necessities of bodily function and species reproduction are properly hidden away in privacy' (Pitkin, 1981: 331). Pitkin's Arendt quotation is from *The Human Condition*: (1958: 28 [30 and 62]).

23 (Arendt, 1958: 176).

24 (ibid.: 180). However, for Arendt, this form of 'sheer togetherness', which was characteristic of the Greek *polis*, has been lost; for, with the blurring of the distinction between private and public, the true meaning of action has been forgotten. The rise of the 'social', that 'curiously hybrid' (ibid.: 35) realm, has led to the emergence of behavior at the expense of action. The 'social' sphere, which simultaneously appeared with the birth of the modern age, and which, strictly speaking, is neither public nor private, 'expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude the spontaneous action or outstanding achievement' (ibid.: 40). Thus, for Arendt, the 'social' suggests a third realm as distinguished from the private and the public. It is the thematization and description of this third realm which establish her illuminating critique of modernity.

25 (Arendt, 1958: 50).

26 (ibid.: 197).

27 (ibid.: 205–6).

28 (Pitkin, 1981: 341). Pitkin realizes that this is not Arendt's intention and she says as much in the following paragraph: 'Arendt explicitly disparaged trivial and vain self-display. Anyone who consciously strives to create a certain self-image is bound to fail; and any society in which this is a widespread motive is bound to fail.'

29 (Arendt, 1958: 59).

30 (ibid.: 50).

31 (ibid.: 52).

32 (Arendt, 1955: 10).

- 33 (Arendt, 1958: 52–3).
- 34 (ibid.: 52).
- 35 (ibid.: 182–3; emphasis added).
- 36 These two conceptions must *not* be understood as strictly separate, but rather as profoundly interrelated.
- 37 (Arendt, 1958: 182–3).
- 38 (ibid.: 55).
- 39 (ibid.).
- 40 (ibid.: 50).
- 41 (Arendt, 1954: 156; emphasis added).
- 42 (Arendt, 1954: 186).
- 43 By arguing that the family is much more than simply a realm which attends to the necessities of life, that it rather is a sphere where the self-disclosive element endemic to speech and action is essential, a reinterpretation of the meaning of the public realm as a sphere where the necessities of life are of no concern is simultaneously suggested. Such a reinterpretation of the public would amount to an argument for public policies which take these necessities into consideration – policies such as, for example, *both* maternity *and* paternity leave, basic health-insurance and the like.
- 44 (Arendt, 1958: 242).
- 45 (Arendt, 1963: 85).
- 46 (ibid.: 86).
- 47 (Arendt, 1958: 52).
- 48 (ibid.: 242).
- 49 (ibid.).
- 50 (Arendt, 1958: 242; emphasis added). This assertion, besides introducing a certain worldly quality to the heretofore strictly private realm of the family, is all the more enigmatic due to Arendt's curious use of both the present and future tenses. On the one hand, the birth of the child itself introduces into the relationship of the lovers an 'in-between' which suggests the emergence of at least a limited kind of world. However, on the other hand, this birth is 'representative' and only an 'indication' of an insertion of a new world which apparently has not yet occurred but *will* eventually.
- 51 The question at hand is not whether Arendt's position is inconsistent, for, when pressed, the family must, on Arendt's view, be relegated to the private. This is clear throughout. Therefore, the following discussion concerning the extent to which action and speech are possible within the family, though it appropriates Arendtian terminology, deviates significantly from Arendt's own position and must be recognized as so doing.
- 52 (Arendt, 1958: 242).
- 53 (Arendt, 1954: 185).
- 54 (Arendt, 1958: 177).
- 55 (ibid.: 178).
- 56 (ibid.).
- 57 This denial of an idealization of love would open the possibility of importing the existentialia of speech and action into non-traditional families (families without children, homosexual families) as well.
- 58 See page 91 above (Arendt, 1958: 57).

- 59 (ibid.; emphasis added).
- 60 (ibid.: 59).
- 61 This can be seen in the following quotation: 'To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by it appearing to *all*; "for what appears to all, this we call Being," and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality.' (ibid.: 199; emphasis added).
- 62 (Okin, 1989: 26 ff.).
- 63 Surely Arendt realizes this, for, in a citation cited already above, p. 91, she clearly indicates the importance and irreducibility of positional distance which is the condition for the emergence of a space of appearance between people. Unfortunately, on Arendt's view this sort of irreducibility of position does not extend to the realm of the family.
- 64 (Okin, 1989: 32).
- 65 It is this very fact that led Martin Buber to write of the way in which, through the essential experience of marriage, we may come to know something of the nature of the body politic: 'Marriage, essentially understood, brings one into an essential relation to the "world;" more precisely, to the body politic, to its malformation and its genuine form, to its sickness and its health. . . . He . . . who has entered into marriage, has been in earnest with the fact that the other *is*; with the fact that I cannot share in the Present Being without sharing in the being of the other. . . . But thereby a man has decisively entered into relation with otherness; and the basic structure of otherness, in many ways uncanny but never quite unholy or incapable of being hallowed, in which I and the others who meet me in my life are inwoven, is the body politic' (Buber, 1965: 60–1).
- 66 (Arendt, 1958: 55).
- 67 (ibid.: 184).
- 68 This clearly ought to be the case between adult members of the family; and although young children cannot be considered equal in the same sense, there remains both a common ground upon which to meet them and a distinctness of perspective, which satisfy the requirements that Arendt suggests as the conditions for speech and action. See p. 88, above.
- 69 As I have attempted to illustrate in the notes of this paper, Arendt's critique of modern mass society is based on an interpretation of precisely what happens when the distinction between public and private is blurred. See Notes 7, 17 and 24. It is, however, not altogether clear that the destruction of the public/private distinction necessarily leads directly to modern mass society where the fundamental mode of activity is behavior. The re-interpretation of the status of the family offered in this paper opens up the possibility for a re-interpretation of the public realm itself. This is not to argue that the public realm must be modeled after the family, but rather that the traditional criteria separating the distinction needs to be re-thought. However, such a re-interpretation of the public as a space where the necessities of life are in fact to be considered, does not necessarily suggest that the public realm is to be based upon precisely the same modes of relation endemic to the family. Such an interpretation of the public would be, in

relation to the traditional idealization of the family, the reverse idealization of the public realm.
70 (Okin, 1991: 195).

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