Fighting Without Hatred:  
Hannah Arendt’s Agonistic Rhetoric  

Patricia Roberts-Miller

In the field of political theory, Hannah Arendt has recently been receiving considerable interest, and this is potentially good news for rhetoricians, as she is one of few political theorists favorably disposed to rhetoric. In contrast to someone like Jürgen Habermas, for whom rhetoric is a kind of less desirable alternative to communicative action, Arendt describes rhetoric as the ideal form of discourse, a goal to which we should aspire despite the difficulties. By rhetoric, Arendt means agonistic rhetoric, or what is sometimes called pro-con thinking—confrontational, combative, and adversarial. For some theorists of rhetoric, agonism is rhetoric (Walter Ong, James Kastely, Thomas Sloane, and, arguably, Kenneth Burke), but a more popular approach is to distinguish between adversarial and collaborative rhetoric, dismissing the former. As John Gage has remarked with some irony, it is a convention in discussions of argument to set out a division between some version of argument-as-fight and a kind of argument that is more collaborative and less confrontational. As soon as someone sets up that dichotomy, Gage says, you can bet that they will go on to argue for the kind that is collaborative (“Reasoned”). Dennis Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn Cooper similarly note that the rhetorical turn has been one that emphasizes collaboration, and Susan Jarratt has bemoaned the prevalence of the assumption that one must avoid classroom conflict.

Jarratt is right to say that mistrust of agonism is reflected in much classroom practice. John Ramage and John Bean, for instance, title one of the sections of their textbook on argumentation, “Argument Is Not Pro-Con Debate,” and they say, “Although debate is an excellent activity for developing critical thinking, its weakness is that it can turn argument into a game of winners and losers rather than a process of cooperative
inquiry" (4). Thomas Sloane says that “no recent book on rhetoric and composition, not one written within the last fifty years, has urged a restoration of debate, of pro and con argumentation” (75). This aversion to adversarial argument is likely to be simply the reflection of the larger cultural assumptions about agonism: Deborah Tannen’s enormously popular *The Argument Culture* both asserts and assumes that agonistic argument is bad; the phrase “from conflict to community” serves as the title for numerous books, reports, and articles; and a children’s book from the Conflict Resolution Library distinguishes between an argument and a discussion, saying about the former, “Arguing doesn’t usually change the way another person thinks. Most arguments leave people feeling even angrier than before” (Adams 6).

There is good reason to be hostile to agonistic argument. Perhaps its most famous vice is that it encourages wrangling. Lynch, George, and Cooper describe this frustrating but common result when trying to teach argument:

> In their writings, our students fall easily into one of two camps: for or against. They cling to their original positions as if those were sacred to home, country, and spiritual identity. Too frequently absent from these debates is any real knowledge of the issue at hand as anything more than a pointless argument among people who do not care very much about the outcome—except that it is always better, in the classroom as in many other arenas, to be on the winning rather than the losing side. (61)

This is an old complaint; for example, John Locke, in his discussion of the role of rhetoric and logic in the education of gentlemen, recommends that one ensure that one’s son *not* learn the art of disputing:

> Is there anything more inconsistent with civil conversation and the end of all debate than not to take an answer, though ever so full and satisfactory, but still to go on with the dispute as long as equivocal sounds can furnish . . . a term to wrangle with on the one side, or a distinction on the other? Whether pertinent or impertinent, sense or nonsense, agreeing with or contrary to what he had said before, it matters not. For this in short is the way and perfection of logical disputes: that the opponent never take any answer, nor the respondent ever yield to any argument. (140–41)

What, then, is the case for agonism? This is the place where Arendt is so helpful. Possibly because Arendt’s affection for agonistic rhetoric is part and parcel of her theories about totalitarianism, the pressure to conform,
and the political consequences of thought, she makes what strikes me as the strongest argument, if not for agonism, then at least for replacing much of our dislike of conflict with a mistrust of consensus.

**Totalitarianism and the Competitive Space of Agonism**

Arendt is probably most famous for her analysis of totalitarianism (especially her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*), but the recent attention has been on her criticism of mass culture (*The Human Condition*). Arendt’s main criticism of the current human condition is that the common world of deliberate and joint action is fragmented into solipsistic and unreflective behavior. In an especially lovely passage, she says that in mass society people

are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective. (*Human* 58)

What Arendt so beautifully describes is that isolation and individualism are not corollaries, and may even be antithetical because obsession with one’s own self and the particularities of one’s life prevents one from engaging in conscious, deliberate, collective action. Individuality, unlike isolation, depends upon a collective *with whom* one argues in order to direct the common life. Self-obsession, even (especially?) when coupled with isolation from one’s community is far from apolitical; it has political consequences. Perhaps a better way to put it is that it is political precisely because it aspires to be apolitical. This fragmented world in which many people live simultaneously and even similarly but not exactly together is what Arendt calls the “social.”

Arendt does not mean that group behavior is impossible in the realm of the social, but that social behavior consists “in some way of isolated individuals, incapable of solidarity or mutuality, who abdicate their human capacities and responsibilities to a projected ‘they’ or ‘it,’ with disastrous consequences, both for other people and eventually for themselves” (Pitkin 79). One can behave, but not act. For someone like Arendt, a German-assimilated Jew, one of the most frightening aspects of the Holocaust was the ease with which a people who had not been extraordinarily anti-Semitic could be put to work industriously and efficiently on the genocide of the Jews. And what was striking about the perpetrators of
the genocide, ranging from minor functionaries who facilitated the murder transports up to major figures on trial at Nuremberg, was their constant and apparently sincere insistence that they were not responsible. For Arendt, this was not a peculiarity of the German people, but of the current human and heavily bureaucratic condition of twentieth-century culture: we do not consciously choose to engage in life's activities; we drift into them, or we do them out of a desire to conform. Even while we do them, we do not acknowledge an active, willed choice to do them; instead, we attribute our behavior to necessity, and we perceive ourselves as determined—determined by circumstance, by accident, by what "they" tell us to do. We do something from within the anonymity of a mob that we would never do as an individual; we do things for which we will not take responsibility. Yet, whether or not people acknowledge responsibility for the consequences of their actions, those consequences exist. Refusing to accept responsibility can even make those consequences worse, in that the people who enact the actions in question, because they do not admit their own agency, cannot be persuaded to stop those actions. They are simply doing their jobs. In a totalitarian system, however, everyone is simply doing his or her job; there never seems to be anyone who can explain, defend, and change the policies. Thus, it is, as Arendt says, rule by nobody.

It is illustrative to contrast Arendt's attitude toward discourse to Habermas'. While both are critical of modern bureaucratic and totalitarian systems, Arendt's solution is the playful and competitive space of agonism; it is not the rational-critical public sphere. The "actual content of political life" is "the joy and the gratification that arise out of being in company with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal identity and beginning something entirely new" ("Truth" 263). According to Seyla Benhabib, Arendt's public realm emphasizes the assumption of competition, and it "represents that space of appearances in which moral and political greatness, heroism, and preeminence are revealed, displayed, shared with others. This is a competitive space in which one competes for recognition, precedence, and acclaim" (78). These qualities are displayed, but not entirely for purposes of acclamation; they are not displays of one's self, but of ideas and arguments, of one's thought. When Arendt discusses Socrates' thinking in public, she emphasizes his performance: "He performed in the marketplace the way the flute-player performed at a banquet. It is sheer performance, sheer activity"; nevertheless, it was thinking: "What he
actually did was to make *public*, in discourse, the thinking process” (*Lectures* 37). Pitkin summarizes this point: “Arendt says that the heroism associated with politics is not the mythical machismo of ancient Greece but something more like the existential leap into action and public exposure” (175–76). Just as it is not machismo, although it does have considerable ego involved, so it is not instrumental rationality; Arendt’s discussion of the kinds of discourse involved in public action include myths, stories, and personal narratives.

Furthermore, the competition is not ruthless; it does not imply a willingness to triumph at all costs. Instead, it involves something like having such a passion for ideas and politics that one is willing to take risks. One tries to articulate the best argument, propose the best policy, design the best laws, make the best response. This is a risk in that one might lose; advancing an argument means that one must be open to the criticisms others will make of it. The situation is agonistic not because the participants manufacture or seek conflict, but because conflict is a necessary consequence of difference. This attitude is reminiscent of Kenneth Burke, who did not try to find a language free of domination but who instead theorized a way that the very tendency toward hierarchy in language might be used against itself (for more on this argument, see Kastely). Similarly, Arendt does not propose a public realm of neutral, rational beings who escape differences to live in the discourse of universals; she envisions one of different people who argue with passion, vehemence, and integrity.

This point about the necessary presence of difference is important, as there is a tradition of seeing Arendt as antifeminist and of assuming that her theories are necessarily antagonistic to women and feminism. This criticism, made most cogently by Adrienne Rich, is not ungrounded; it results from Arendt’s dividing labor from action and putting traditional women’s work in the less valued category of labor. But, as Bonnie Honig has shown, Arendt’s agonism can be useful to feminist critiques of identity because it assumes that difference is inherent; it tends to destabilize categories, including the categories “man” and “woman.” For Arendt, the common world is up for argument because it is created by argument, and part of what gets created is our own identity.

Yet, Arendt’s comments concerning labor should still raise concern; they point to what strikes me as one of the most troubling aspects of agonism: the possibility that it is fundamentally elitist. While everyone may engage in labor that is seen by others, Arendt argues, not everyone engages in public action. Although Arendt is clearly not advocating a
return to classical Greece or Rome, it is still troubling that the cultures that seem to have gotten the notion of action right are ones that have a leisured class precisely because there are entire categories of people (women, slaves, noncitizens) who spend their time doing the labor that permits the elite to engage in action.

I should emphasize that this concern comes not from anything that Arendt says directly, but from the potential implications of Arendt's distinctions and analogies. The impulse behind the labor/action distinction is certainly not to denigrate women's work (as both Honig and Pitkin have argued, the equation of "social" and "feminine" is problematic), but to describe the lack of genuinely public life in modern political culture. Pitkin explains that the goal of *The Human Condition* is "to articulate a general theory of free citizenship that would recapture the principled but tough-minded realism of the wartime Resistance without the dreadful, unacceptable costs that those years had entailed and without the external constraints on freedom that the occupation had imposed" (112).

**Thought and the Social**

Arendt's primary intention in *The Human Condition*, as in many of her works, is to argue for the special nature of thought. This goal became especially pressing after she observed the trial of Adolf Eichmann for his part in the attempted genocide of the Jews. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt describes her reaction to Eichmann. Having been taught that evil results from arrogance, envy, hatred, or covetousness, she expected to see some monster who would exemplify such vices:

> However, what I was confronted with was utterly different and still undeniably factual. I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—at least the very effective one now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but thoughtlessness. (4)

Eichmann perfectly exemplified what Arendt famously called the "banality of evil" but that might be better thought of as the bureaucratization of
evil (or, as a friend once aptly put it, the evil of banality). That is, he was able to engage in mass murder because he was able not to think about it, especially not from the perspective of the victims, and he was able to exempt himself from personal responsibility by telling himself (and anyone else who would listen) that he was just following orders. It was the bureaucratic system that enabled him to do both. He was not exactly passive; he was, on the contrary, very aggressive in trying to do his duty. He behaved with the "ruthless, competitive exploitation" and "inauthentic, self-disparaging conformism" that characterizes those who people totalitarian systems (Pitkin 87).

Arendt’s theorizing of totalitarianism has been justly noted as one of her strongest contributions to philosophy. She saw that a situation like Nazi Germany is different from the conventional understanding of a tyranny. Pitkin writes,

Totalitarianism cannot be understood, like earlier forms of domination, as the ruthless exploitation of some people by others, whether the motive be selfish calculation, irrational passion, or devotion to some cause. Understanding totalitarianism's essential nature requires solving the central mystery of the holocaust—the objectively useless and indeed dysfunctional, fanatical pursuit of a purely ideological policy, a pointless process to which the people enacting it have fallen captive. (87)

Totalitarianism is closely connected to bureaucracy; it is oppression by rules, rather than by people who have willfully chosen to establish certain rules. It is the triumph of the social.

Critics (both friendly and hostile) have paid considerable attention to Arendt’s category of the “social,” largely because, despite spending so much time on the notion, Arendt remains vague on certain aspects of it. Pitkin appropriately compares Arendt’s concept of the social to the Blob, the type of monster that figured in so many post-war horror movies. That Blob was “an evil monster from outer space, entirely external to and separate from us [that] had fallen upon us intent on debilitating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us, gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serve its purposes” (4).

Pitkin is critical of this version of the “social” and suggests that Arendt meant (or perhaps should have meant) something much more complicated. The simplistic version of the social-as-Blob can itself be an instance of Blob thinking; Pitkin’s criticism is that Arendt talks at times as though the social comes from outside of us and has fallen upon
us, turning us into robots. Yet, Arendt’s major criticism of the social is that it involves seeing ourselves as victimized by something that comes from outside our own behavior. I agree with Pitkin that Arendt’s most powerful descriptions of the social (and the other concepts similar to it, such as her discussion of totalitarianism, imperialism, Eichmann, and parvenus) emphasize that these processes are not entirely out of our control but that they happen to us when, and because, we keep refusing to make active choices. We create the social through negligence. It is not the sort of force in a Sorcerer’s Apprentice, which once let loose cannot be stopped; on the contrary, it continues to exist because we structure our world to reward social behavior. Pitkin writes, “From childhood on, in virtually all our institutions, we reward euphemism, salesmanship, slogans, and we punish and suppress truth-telling, originality, thoughtfulness. So we continually cultivate ways of (not) thinking that induce the social” (274). I want to emphasize this point, as it is important for thinking about criticisms of some forms of the social construction of knowledge: denying our own agency is what enables the social to thrive. To put it another way, theories of powerlessness are self-fulfilling prophecies.

Arendt grants that there are people who willed the Holocaust, but she insists that totalitarian systems result not so much from the Hitlers or Stalins as from the bureaucrats who may or may not agree with the established ideology but who enforce the rules for no stronger motive than a desire to avoid trouble with their superiors (see Eichmann and Life). They do not think about what they do. One might prevent such occurrences—or, at least, resist the modern tendency toward totalitarianism—by thought: “critical thought is in principle anti-authoritarian” (Lectures 38).

By “thought” Arendt does not mean eremitic contemplation; in fact, she has great contempt for what she calls “professional thinkers,” refusing herself to become a philosopher or to call her work philosophy. Young-Bruehl, Benhabib, and Pitkin have each said that Heidegger represented just such a professional thinker for Arendt, and his embrace of Nazism epitomized the genuine dangers such “thinking” can pose (see Arendt’s “Heidegger”). “Thinking” is not typified by the isolated contemplation of philosophers; it requires the arguments of others and close attention to the truth. It is easy to overstate either part of that harmony. One must consider carefully the arguments and viewpoints of others:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the
standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (“Truth” 241)

There are two points to emphasize in this wonderful passage. First, one does not get these standpoints in one’s mind through imagining them, but through listening to them; thus, good thinking requires that one hear the arguments of other people. Hence, as Arendt says, “critical thinking, while still a solitary business, does not cut itself off from ‘all others.’” Thinking is, in this view, necessarily public discourse: critical thinking is possible “only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection” (Lectures 43). Yet, it is not a discourse in which one simply announces one’s stance; participants are interlocutors and not just speakers: they must listen. Unlike many current versions of public discourse, this view presumes that speech matters. It is not asymmetric manipulation of others, nor merely an economic exchange; it must be a world into which one enters and by which one might be changed.

Second, passages like the above make some readers think that Arendt puts too much faith in discourse and too little in truth (see Habermas). But Arendt is no crude relativist; she believes in truth, and she believes that there are facts that can be more or less distorted. She does not believe that reality is constructed by discourse, or that truth is indistinguishable from falsehood. She insists that the truth has a different pull on us and, consequently, that it has a difficult place in the world of the political. Facts are different from falsehood because, while they can be distorted or denied, especially when they are inconvenient for the powerful, they also have a certain positive force that falsehood lacks: “Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strength of its own: whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable to discover or invent a viable substitute for it. Persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it” (“Truth” 259).
Facts have a strangely resilient quality partially because a lie "tears, as it were, a hole in the fabric of factuality. As every historian knows, one can spot a lie by noticing incongruities, holes, or the junctures of patched-up places" ("Truth" 253). While she is sometimes discouraging about our ability to see the tears in the fabric, citing the capacity of totalitarian governments to create the whole cloth (see "Truth" 252–54), she is also sometimes optimistic. In Eichmann in Jerusalem, she repeats the story of Anton Schmidt—a man who saved the lives of Jews—and concludes that such stories cannot be silenced (230–32). For facts to exert power in the common world, however, these stories must be told. Rational truth (such as principles of mathematics) might be perceptible and demonstrable through individual contemplation, but "factual truth, on the contrary, is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy. It is political by nature" (238). Arendt is neither a positivist who posits an autonomous individual who can correctly perceive truth, nor a relativist who positively asserts the inherent relativism of all perception. Her description of how truth functions does not fall anywhere in the three-part expeditio so prevalent in both rhetoric and philosophy: it is not expressivist, positivist, or social constructivist. Good thinking depends upon good public argument, and good public argument depends upon access to facts: "Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed" (238).

The sort of thinking that Arendt propounds takes the form of action only when it is public argument, and, as such, it is particularly precious: "For if no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the vita activa, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all" (Human 325). Arendt insists that it is "the same general rule—Do not contradict yourself (not your self but your thinking ego)—that determines both thinking and acting" (Lectures 37). In place of the mildly resentful conformism that fuels totalitarianism, Arendt proposes what Pitkin calls "a tough-minded, open-eyed readiness to perceive and judge reality for oneself, in terms of concrete experience and independent, critical theorizing" (274). The paradoxical nature of agonism (that it must involve both individuality and commonality) makes it difficult to maintain, as the temptation is great either to think one's own thoughts without reference to anyone else or to let others do one's thinking.
Arendt’s Polemical Agonism
As I said, agonism does have its advocates within rhetoric—Burke, Ong, Sloane, Gage, and Jarratt, for instance—but while each of these theorists proposes a form of conflictual argument, not one of these is as adversarial as Arendt’s. Agonism can emphasize persuasion, as does John Gage’s textbook *The Shape of Reason* or William Brandt et al.’s *The Craft of Writing*. That is, the goal of the argument is to identify the disagreement and then construct a text that gains the assent of the audience. This is not the same as what Gage (citing Thomas Conley) calls “asymmetrical theories of rhetoric”: theories that “presuppose an active speaker and a passive audience, a speaker whose rhetorical task is therefore to do something to that audience” (“Reasoned” 6). Asymmetric rhetoric is not and cannot be agonistic. Persuasive agonism still values conflict, disagreement, and equality among interlocutors, but it has the goal of reaching agreement, as when Gage says that the process of argument should enable one’s reasons to be “understood and believed” by others (*Shape* 5; emphasis added).

Arendt’s version is what one might call polemical agonism: it puts less emphasis on gaining assent, and it is exemplified both in Arendt’s own writing and in Donald Lazere’s “Ground Rules for Polemicists” and “Teaching the Political Conflicts.” Both forms of agonism (persuasive and polemical) require substantive debate at two points in a long and recursive process. First, one engages in debate in order to invent one’s argument; even silent thinking is a “dialogue of myself with myself” (*Lectures* 40). The difference between the two approaches to agonism is clearest when one presents an argument to an audience assumed to be an opposition. In persuasive agonism, one plays down conflict and moves through reasons to try to persuade one’s audience. In polemical agonism, however, one’s intention is not necessarily to prove one’s case, but to make public one’s thought in order to test it. In this way, communicability serves the same function in philosophy that replicability serves in the sciences; it is how one tests the validity of one’s thought. In persuasive agonism, success is achieved through persuasion; in polemical agonism, success may be marked through the quality of subsequent controversy.

Arendt quotes from a letter Kant wrote on this point:

You know that I do not approach reasonable objections with the intention merely of refuting them, but that in thinking them over I always weave them into my judgments, and afford them the opportunity of overturning all my most cherished beliefs. I entertain the hope that by thus viewing
my judgments impartially from the standpoint of others some third view that will improve upon my previous insight may be obtainable. (Lectures 42)

Kant’s use of “impartial” here is interesting: he is not describing a stance that is free of all perspective; it is impartial only in the sense that it is not his own view. This is the same way that Arendt uses the term; she does not advocate any kind of positivistic rationality, but instead a “universal interdependence” (“Truth” 242). She does not place the origin of the “disinterested pursuit of truth” in science, but at “the moment when Homer chose to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans, and to praise the glory of Hector, the foe and the defeated man, no less than the glory of Achilles, the hero of his kinfolk” (“Truth” 262–63). It is useful to note that Arendt tends not to use the term “universal,” opting more often for “common,” by which she means both what is shared and what is ordinary, a usage that evades many of the problems associated with universalism while preserving its virtues (for a brief but provocative application of Arendt’s notion of common, see Hauser 100–03).

In polemical agonism, there is a sense in which one’s main goal is \textit{not} to persuade one’s readers; persuading one’s readers, if this means that they fail to see errors and flaws in one’s argument, might actually be a sort of failure. It means that one wishes to put forward an argument that makes clear what one’s stance is and why one holds it, but with the intention of provoking critique and counterargument. Arendt describes Kant’s “hope” for his writings not that the number of people who agree with him would increase but “that the circle of his examiners would gradually be enlarged” (Lectures 39); he wanted interlocutors, not acolytes.

This is not consensus-based argument, nor is it what is sometimes called “consociational argument,” nor is this argument as mediation or conflict resolution. Arendt (and her commentators) use the term “fight,” and they mean it. When Arendt describes the values that are necessary in our world, she says, “They are a sense of honor, desire for fame and glory, the spirit of fighting without hatred and ‘without the spirit of revenge,’ and indifference to material advantages” (Crises 167). Pitkin summarizes Arendt’s argument: “Free citizenship presupposes the ability to fight—openly, seriously, with commitment, and about things that really matter—without fanaticism, without seeking to exterminate one’s opponents” (266). My point here is two-fold: first, there is not a simple binary opposition between persuasive discourse and eristic discourse, the conflictual versus the collaborative, or argument as opposed to debate.
Second, while polemical agonism requires diversity among interlocutors, and thus seems an extraordinarily appropriate notion, and while it may be a useful corrective to too much emphasis on persuasion, it seems to me that polemical agonism could easily slide into the kind of wrangling that is simply frustrating. Arendt does not describe just how one is to keep the conflict useful. Although she rejects the notion that politics is "no more than a battlefield of partial, conflicting interests, where nothing count[s] but pleasure and profit, partisanship, and the lust for dominion," she does not say exactly how we are to know when we are engaging in the existential leap of argument versus when we are lusting for dominion ("Truth" 263).

Like other proponents of agonism, Arendt argues that rhetoric does not lead individuals or communities to ultimate Truth; it leads to decisions that will necessarily have to be reconsidered. Even Arendt, who tends to express a greater faith than many agonists (such as Burke, Sloane, or Kastely) in the ability of individuals to perceive truth, insists that self-deception is always a danger, so public discourse is necessary as a form of testing (see especially Lectures and "Truth"). She remarks that it is difficult to think beyond one's self-interest and that "nothing, indeed, is more common, even among highly sophisticated people, than the blind obstinacy that becomes manifest in lack of imagination and failure to judge" ("Truth" 242).

Agonism demands that one simultaneously trust and doubt one's own perceptions, rely on one's own judgment and consider the judgments of others, think for oneself and imagine how others think. The question remains whether this is a kind of thought in which everyone can engage. Is the agonistic public sphere (whether political, academic, or scientific) only available to the few? Benhabib puts this criticism in the form of a question: "That is, is the 'recovery of the public space' under conditions of modernity necessarily an elitist and antidemocratic project that can hardly be reconciled with the demand for universal political emancipation and the universal extension of citizenship rights that have accompanied modernity since the American and French Revolutions?" (75). This is an especially troubling question not only because Arendt's examples of agonistic rhetoric are from elitist cultures, but also because of comments she makes, such as this one from The Human Condition: "As a living experience, thought has always been assumed, perhaps wrongly, to be known only to the few. It may not be presumptuous to believe that these few have not become fewer in our time" (Human 324).

Yet, there are important positive political consequences of agonism.
Arendt’s own promotion of the agonistic sphere helps to explain how the system could be actively moral. It is not an overstatement to say that a central theme in Arendt’s work is the evil of conformity—the fact that the modern bureaucratic state makes possible extraordinary evil carried out by people who do not even have any ill will toward their victims. It does so by “imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (Human 40). It keeps people from thinking, and it keeps them behaving. The agonistic model’s celebration of achievement and verbal skill undermines the political force of conformity, so it is a force against the bureaucratising of evil. If people think for themselves, they will resist dogma; if people think of themselves as one of many, they will empathize; if people can do both, they will resist totalitarianism. And if they talk about what they see, tell their stories, argue about their perceptions, and listen to one another—that is, engage in rhetoric—then they are engaging in antitotalitarian action.

In post-Ramistic rhetoric, it is a convention to have a thesis, and one might well wonder just what mine is—whether I am arguing for or against Arendt’s agonism. Arendt does not lay out a pedagogy for us to follow (although one might argue that, if she had, it would look much like the one Lazere describes in “Teaching”), so I am not claiming that greater attention to Arendt would untangle various pedagogical problems that teachers of writing face. Nor am I claiming that applying Arendt’s views will resolve theoretical arguments that occupy scholarly journals. I am saying, on the one hand, that Arendt’s connection of argument and thinking, as well as her perception that both serve to thwart totalitarianism, suggest that agonal rhetoric (despite the current preference for collaborative rhetoric) is the best discourse for a diverse and inclusive public sphere. On the other hand, Arendt’s advocacy of agonal rhetoric is troubling (and, given her own admiration for Kant, this may be intentional), especially in regard to its potential elitism, masculinism, failure to describe just how to keep argument from collapsing into wrangling, and apparently cheerful acceptance of hierarchy. Even with these flaws, Arendt describes something we would do well to consider thoughtfully: a fact-based but not positivist, communally grounded but not relativist, adversarial but not violent, independent but not expressivist rhetoric.

University of Texas
Austin, Texas
Works Cited


**Nominations Solicited**

The W. Ross Winterowd Award is given for the most outstanding scholarly book published in composition theory each year. The award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd, who has presented it to each year’s recipient at the annual CCCC Convention since 1989. *JAC* readers are invited to nominate books for this award by sending a letter of nomination to Lynn Worsham; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620-5550.

The James L. Kinneavy Award is given for the most outstanding article published in *JAC* each year. The award was generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, former Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas. Professor Kinneavy endowed the award in 1988 and presented it to each year’s recipient at the annual CCCC Convention until he passed away in August 1999. *JAC* readers are invited to nominate articles for this award by contacting the Editor.