

Hannah Arendt and the Centrality of Political Life
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This project constitutes the foundation for my Honors Project, a capstone of my concentration in Political Theory. I will be completing an honors project my senior year on Hannah Arendt. I used the summer as an opportunity to familiarize myself with Arendt's work and much of the scholarly debate of her writings. My readings followed the chronology of Arendt's work, paired with research into secondary scholarship on Arendt.

Arendt attempts to create a robust and highly participatory democratic politics that avoids violence and ideology. Her writings are informed by her awareness of both the importance and the precariousness of political life; she was Jewish and was forced to flee Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. She held that political life was the arena in which individuals could truly be free. To her, the political realm was distinct from social and private life; only in politics can disinterested citizens act and exercise judgement. Arendt was wary of ideology and utopianism. She understood the first to be any attempt to explain history through a single frame, for example, as a struggle between races. To her, utopianism too easily justifies violence as a means of fabricating a new world. It overlooks the contingency of human action. She is similarly wary of social or economic claims in the political realm, as she views these concerns or interests as overwhelming the political.

While Arendt's concerns should be taken seriously – they originate from her understanding of Nazism and Bolshevism – her attempts to found a politics not based in violence contain contradictions and serious issues. Arendt's division of life into public, private, and social overlooks the extent to which violence and necessity in private life are created and reinforced by political institutions. Her reliance on judgement and compromise seems insufficient in challenging or addressing social hegemony. In fact, her upholding of authority seems to reinforce its inevitability. These flaws in her theoretical work become particularly apparent in her discussions of racism in the United States.

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Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship