

## **Towards an ethics of freedom**

### *The Politics of Storytelling in Organizations*

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**Towards an ethics of freedom: the politics of storytelling in organizations****ABSTRACT**

Based upon the work of Arendt's notion of action as freedom and Butler's rework of this notion into a collective, embodied and material performance, this paper proposes an ethics of freedom, which is discussed as a politics of storytelling in organizations. Freedom, it is argued, is closely related to action and hence storytelling and is experienced in between people in a historical and material space. Ethics is thus conditioned on the political framing of this space in terms how that space conditions how people may appear in storytelling as well as how people together transforms this space for future appearances. This has important consequences for an organizational ethics. First, stories are conditioned on freedom, take place in between people and presume a space for a political subject. As a second point, this notion of freedom forwards attention towards the framing of the organizational space and the possibilities concerning appearance that this entails. This goes beyond the question of freedom as a mere possibility towards a material and embodied reality focused on affording peoples appearances as unique subjects performing on an organizational stage. Finally, ethics is always a matter of politics, which thus collects the ethical questions concerning the formation of the "I" and the relation to the "other". The "I" and the "other" are seen as inevitably intertwined and entangled, which implies that their separation not only violates the "I" and the "other" but also the whole condition of plurality seen as the ultimate condition that people cannot escape.

**Keywords:**

Arendt, Butler, ethics, freedom, politics of storytelling, space of appearance.

## **Towards an ethics of freedom: the politics of storytelling in organizations**

### **INTRODUCTION**

While Hannah Arendt is well known in social science studies to offer a compelling vision of political freedom (Cane, 2015: 55) her writings have generally failed to catch the attention of scholars of business and organizational ethics. The notion of freedom is instead used to denote the work of ethical self-formation following the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 2000; Ibarra-Colado, Clegg, Rhodes & Kornberger, 2006; Townley, 1995). Underlining this focus on the self, Foucault emphasized that freedom is a condition of ethics and that ethics is the form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection (Foucault, 1997: 284).

The limitations concerning ethical self-formation is illustrated by a comment Arendt once made where she argued that the center of moral considerations is the self, while the center of politics is the world (Arendt, 2003: 153). Arendt was generally critical towards the notion of freedom involved in the work of the self on the self. For her politics and freedom go together and condition each other. It is something people experience in their interaction with others, not in dialogues with themselves (Arendt, 2006: 148). In fact this inner state of “interaction” with oneself can be regarded as a sheltered space from a world in which people can feel free without having the political space in which they can appear and act freely as political subjects. Without outer manifestations the freedom that is exercised in dialogue with oneself—the activity she calls thinking—is politically irrelevant (Arendt, 2006: 146).

Arendt’s notion of freedom thus challenges the organizational ethics, which is grounded in moral considerations concerning the self and how this self shapes her subjectivity in relation to others. Instead ethics is always a question of politics (Butler, 2012). The ethical implications of this recognition however exceed the demand of the subject to become political

(e.g. McMurray, Pullen & Rhodes, 2011) and necessarily also include attention to the political spaces in which plural people—with Arendt words—can appear freely before one another with their voices, intentions, motivations, souls and bodies. Such appearances happen through storytelling and in other kinds of artful performances (Arendt, 1998: 50).

Importantly this space is a plural space for plural subjects in the important sense that people cannot escape the condition of plurality from which they were made. When combined with the work of Butler (2015), ethics is even moved away from a purely anthropocentric position towards an ecocentric ethics in which people are not only answerable to the plural conditions of their own and others existence but also to the living plural world of animals, organisms and nature. It follows from Butler's rework of Arendt's notion of action as a speech act implies that stories are instead seen as lived, embodied and material performances in which is embedded multiple human and non-human voices.

As a consequence, material and discursive affordances are important conditions for action and hence freedom. Freedom is not only a question of the right to appear but is also a question of the possibilities concerning appearance (Butler, 2015)—a point, which inevitably directs attention towards the distribution of discursive and material affordances, embedded in organizational spaces. This paper frames an organizational ethics of freedom from Arendt's and Butler work on political action and space of appearance. The result is a politics of storytelling which is conceived as an organizational space of appearance understood as a collective, relational, embodied, discursive and material space in which people can appear to each other as unique subjects with own voices, emotions, intentions and interests.

The paper proceeds in the next section by positioning an ethics of freedom in relation to organizational ethics. This implies moving the locus of ethics from the reflexive self towards active political engagement. This is followed by an elaboration of an ethics of freedom. This is accomplished first through a discussion of how Arendt perceived the

relations between freedom and politics, which includes an account of the relations between the “I” and the “other”. The separation of “I” and “other”, which underscores most accounts of organizational ethics is dissolved in return for an emphasis on the basic entanglement of “I”/“other”.

The relations between freedom and storytelling are then discussed. Freedom is presented as the ability to create, which means that freedom is experienced and embedded in the virtuous and embodied performance of art—a unique story performed in interaction with others in a collective space. A discussion of the politics of storytelling is then undertaken. This is related to the spatial conditions for storytelling and freedom, which are identified as important and critical for an organizational ethics of freedom.

Finally the paper concludes by arguing that attention is moved towards the affordances embedded in organizational spaces of appearance. While current accounts of ethics have emphasized peoples’ personal responsibility, the ethics of freedom constructed puts the spotlight on the possibilities of appearance. This point moves the battleground of ethics away from the self towards the organization of the relations between people including the distribution of discursive and material affordances.

### **THE ETHICS OF FREEDOM AND ORGANIZATIONAL ETHICS**

To construct an organizational ethics of freedom from Hannah Arendt’s philosophy is challenging and may appear as almost paradoxical. She made a clear distinction between ethics and politics as noted above where she hinted that moral philosophy was almost irrelevant without manifestations in the world of politics. By that expression she however did not mean to abolish ethics but rather to resituate the hierarchical ordering between the “*vita contemplativa*”—reflexive life—and the “*vita activa*”—political life—which according to her had been embedded in moral philosophy since ancient times (Arendt, 1998: 12-15).

Arendt's purpose was thus to attain a new balance between reflexive life and active political life, which for her replaces "the enormous superiority" that contemplation for her had had (Arendt, 1998: 14). This favor of contemplation had also meant that "freedom" had been translated as the ending of all political activity—"to free oneself" from the entanglement in worldly affairs and the business of this world (Arendt, 1998: 14-15). Accordingly, Arendt believed that ethical discourse had been concerned with the reflexive self. She refers to the concern for the self as thinking in solitude, which concerns the individual in her singularity. It follows that the criterion of right and wrong in the last analysis depends on what people decide with regard to themselves. For example: "I cannot do particular things because having done them I can no longer live with myself" (Arendt, 2003: 97).

This living with myself—the only person that people can be sure of that they will be together with for the rest of their life—relies on thinking where the being and judging of oneself is performed. This mode of existence is called "solitude". Thinking in solitude is thus an inner dialogue—a "reflexive" two-in-one conversation with oneself (Arendt, 2003: 98). These are moments where people are free from outside disturbances and together with themselves or their friends as thinking subjects. It happens without outside disturbances. The problem for Arendt is that it does not work in terms of making a transformation in the world. It is only applicable when the social is an unreliable source of moral action (Arendt, 2003: 105). To make an impact people have to engage in political action.

Whether reflexivity has been dominant in contemporary organizational ethics is another question. Although reflexivity is important and dominant it is probably an exaggeration to claim that it is necessarily disengaged from action and practice to the degree with which Arendt characterizes moral philosophy. The organizational ethics, which is addressed here, comprises here two of the dominant conceptions of ethics in CMS identified by McMurray et al. (2011): the care of the self and the care for the other. Even if the picture is

more nuanced, it can be argued that reflexivity is superior in relation to political action. The point is not only that reflexivity is the important means for ethics in both perspectives. Even if they claim to be engaged with action, the notion of the political as a mode of action is rather weak.

One example is protrepsis. Protrepsis, which denotes an old Greek way of working on one's own self, has been developed as a methodology targeted towards framing moments where managers can enjoy thinking in solitude or with friends (Kirkeby, Hede, Mejlhede & Larsen, 2010). The goal of this practical philosophy is to do good for the sake of good. Instead of focusing on concrete tasks and challenges, it focuses on important concepts and values for the managers on a more abstract and general level.

Such exercises are explorative and open-minded journeys that centre on reflections and conversations about “the true”, “the good”, “the just”, and “the beautiful” in life (Larsen & Jægerum, 2012). The aim is to gain rich understandings of and insights into how those phenomena can be understood so that managers can obtain clarity and awareness of who they are for the sake of the common good. This is probably the most obvious example of a contemporary one-sided emphasis on a “bios theoretikos”—contemplative life—perceived as the only “...truly free way of life” (Arendt, 1998: 14). The “bios politikos” in the form of labour or work is not considered to possess sufficient dignity in regard to leading an autonomous and authentic life (Arendt, 1998: 13).

Protrepsis is interesting because it is grounded in Foucault's ethics of freedom understood as self-formation, which means that the care of the self is important. This care of the self is according to Kirkeby et al. (2010: 100) the foundation of wisdom. Philosophizing and reflecting are the important tools by which one searches for finding the deep values, which are important for oneself and the community in which one participates. It is derived from ancient Greece and is therefore different from the Christian technologies of the self,

which later developed (Bell & Taylor, 2003), and in which self-awareness replaced self-formation as an ideal (Townley, 1995).

Ibarra-Colado et al. (2006) develop an ethical approach, which is based on these Christian technologies. Their approach mediates between individual responsibility and of organizationally determined ethics (Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006: 46). They argue that Foucault's ethics of freedom is concerned with principles for how people within power relations can still frame themselves as unique subjects. They identify two types of governing one's conduct in modern organizations: the self-examination and the confession which today in organizations are facilitated by personnel counselling, group dynamics technologies and practices known as psy(sci)ences: psychology, psycho-therapy and so forth (Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006: 49).

Foucault's ethics of freedom have thus developed in two directions in organizational ethics. Both are grounded in technologies of the self by which one binds oneself to some conception of good, which resists the normalizing power of the state, organization or other apparatuses (Critchley, 2012: 41). The Christian ideal of self-awareness implies however practices through which people actively inscribe themselves into discursive regimes. The self-examination and the confession mentioned above play important roles in that they function as technologies by which one's self becomes a site of intervention to be explored, modified and fashioned into particular disciplined subjectivities (Edwards, 2008: 23-24, 29-31).

Self-awareness is premised on the belief on an inner self, where knowledge of the self is achieved by turning inwards towards a true or real self (Townley, 1995: 274-275). Self-formation, however, implies a care of activity (Townley, 1995: 275). It entails being aware of the detail of what one does; the daily routines of what one thinks and feels. Further it sees the self as formed through the active engagement with others and the world where ethical action is judged on one's performance with others. Apparently the Greek ideal of ethical self-



formation is more applicable in regard to an ethics of freedom, which was also Foucault's conviction (Foucault, 1997).

Another take on the discussion is however to zoom in on the political positions implied by the care of the self. Even if the care of the self is stressed, such processes take place in the company with others when applied as managerial technologies. They imply particular subject positions. In the care of the self as self-awareness, the manager or psychologist takes over the priest's position in which the other then enters in a submissive position where one either has to confess one's sins in order to improve oneself or has to submit oneself to the razor-shape gaze of the external analyst. This power relationship has been identified by Foucault as "pastoral power" and has been metaphorically described as the relationship between the "shepherd" and "the flock" (Foucault, 2000, 333-335). This underlines how relations of power are imagined in technologies of the self towards self-awareness, and which affect the actual framing of the space in the now.

Self-formation seems more attractive here. In the form of *protrepsis*, it is however elitist in two different ways. It puts, as mentioned above, action in an inferior position to contemplation and reflexivity, which means that a particular discourse and the people who master this discourse are implicitly regarded as superior beings. Secondly, it was historically framed as an approach for the supervision, guidance and education of the ruler. It is thus embedded in a discourse, which is concerned with the masters' self-formation. The idea of a master and servant is thus reproduced is embedded in the heritage of the contribution to leadership from ancient Greece.

Playing with these subject positions is not meant to overrule the proposition that something good and great can come out of the care of the self. It is simply done in order to reflect on the political relationships and subject positions implied by these techniques and methodologies, and which become parts of the spaces of appearance. This notion will be

elaborated later. An additional comment is that the care of the self in any case is restrained to its focus of the self and therefore does not pay attention to the political spaces in which the subject has to enact herself.

The idea of ethics as a care of the self has in CMS been challenged on the grounds that it does not account adequately for the relation to the other (Critchley, 2012; McMurray et al., 2011). It has thus been replaced in popularity by a more situated and dynamic ethics, which is referred to as an ethics of recognition. This ethics stresses the other as the starting point for ethics (Levinas, 1991; Løgstrup, 1997). Especially Levinas' ethics has been important in organizational ethics (Jones, 2003; Bevan & Corvellec, 2007; Byers & Rhodes, 2007; McMurray, Rhodes & Pullen, 2011). It emphasizes the idea of infinite responsibility towards the other. This position locates in principle ethics in everyday actions and relations. However, in the translation and application of this ethical position, reflexivity is often imposed on it as a means of reflecting on one's relationship to the other.

The reflexive self is for example important in relational leadership practices. Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011) for example stress reflexivity as a means of making leaders more aware of others' perspectives and improving their relational capacity (see also Larsen & Madsen; 2016; Hersted, 2016). Their position thus moves focus away from the care of the self towards the care for the other. This care for the other is largely accomplished in micro-interactions by which language use is an important source of reflection on the self's position and prejudice.

Furthermore Levinas' ethics in organizational ethics has been criticized and revised based on the work of Derrida (2002) into an ethics of questioning where deconstruction is used to resituate dominant positions in organizational phenomena (Anonymous, 2010) or to question organizational codes of ethics (Rasche, 2010; Painter-Morland, 2010). These latter approaches propose questioning as a way of confronting an inherent dilemma in Levinas' ethics. Namely that action always implies a choice and thus an inclusion and exclusion of

who is the favoured and privileged other (Derrida, 1999). Deconstruction and questioning are thus applied in order to reflect on own prejudices by which ethical spaces may become more plural.

This connects to inherent problems in Levinas' ethics. The notion of unconditional generosity makes it indifferent, who the other is and what the other has done (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2015: 239). Furthermore Butler claims that Levinas' other is not any other; that he argued that it was only within a Judeo-Christian tradition, that ethical relations were possible (Butler, 2015: 106). Butler even accuses Levinas for having argued that the Palestinian has no face (Butler, 2015: 107). This interpretation—because it is an interpretation—has however been refuted by Eisenstadt & Katz (2016). Butler's critique however underlines the danger of disregarding the religious undertones of Levinas' ethics. This could mean that this Judeo-Christian tradition has a ghostly appearance in the specific form that the subject position of the "I" is unconditionally submissive in the meeting with the other. All responsibility are directed towards the individual "I", who is always guilty in the face of the other (Martinon, 2016), and who has the responsibility of renouncing the self in favour of the other.

Both traditions are engaged with the individual self in the form of self-care or in the form of improving one's engagement with the other. They thus might be effective in individualizing and isolating responsibility, guilt and shame to the individual self (Bjerg & Staunæs, 2011). It follows that the ethics of the care of and for the self/other and Capitalism is not necessarily mutually exclusive as has been suggested by among others MacDonald (2005: 184). Instead Capitalism seems to some extent to have appropriated ethics and has made it into its obedient and disciplined servant. The triumph of Capitalism rests, among others, on that the self—seen in isolation— has become the primary battleground of ethics while little

attention has been paid to the discursive and material affordances of the social life in which the self has to be made.

The latter is a political question that nonetheless conditions the creation of the subject and hence what kind of ethical action that can be expected from this subject. The next section will begin to lay the foundation for such a political understanding of ethics.

## **POLITICS AND FREEDOM**

The first step in an ethics of freedom is to frame another understanding of what freedom is and how it relates to politics. The very notion of freedom invites almost intuitive misunderstanding. It is according to Arendt riddled with associations to “free will” or to a “sovereign individual”. Because ethics is about restraining oneself from certain actions and because freedom is intuitively associated with free will, ethics and freedom are, according to this understanding, almost binary opposites. This view of freedom is however misunderstood.

Arendt argues instead that freedom is experienced in the spaces between people. It is directly linked with and cannot be understood independently of politics and action. She notes (1961: 191) that freedom is seldom the direct aim of political action but it is the reason why it exists at all. The notions of freedom as “free will” or as “sovereignty” have furthermore according to Arendt (1961: 204) been disastrous because they presume an independence of all others and of the ability, if necessary, to assert oneself against these others.

These notions contrast directly with one of the essential elements of the human condition, which she identifies as a reciprocal interdependence of people including the historical, spatial and material world that people are born into (Arendt, 1961: 204). This interdependence is linked to another human condition, which is plurality (Arendt, 1998: 7). “Only in death is human existence completely and utterly individual” (Arendt, 1961: 205). An ethics of freedom is thus tied to an idea of collective political action where plurality is the

underlying condition (MacLachlan, 2015; Keladu, 2015). According to Arendt, people can only be free or suffer the reverse in interaction with others. Only with reference to one another and of the things they do—the field of politics—can they experience freedom as something positive and not as an inner space in which they can negate compulsion (Arendt, 1961: 191).

Arendt thus ties freedom directly to action. In fact she claims that *“to act” and “to be free” are one* (Arendt, 1961: 196). To act and to be free is a basic human condition and as such a basic human right. But by freedom she is not referring to unrestrained action. Action is always conditioned on and must respond to the historical, spatial and material world, which has been handed over to us and from where we act. In fact freedom is closely tied to the creative reenactment of this world but is also tied to people, to nature and to the world. Arendt does in other words not emphasize absolute freedom. Her notion of freedom is a relational and contingent freedom tied to a historical, material and spatial world.

The potentiality of action almost always exists in social affairs. It always however relies on the plural others together with whom one is living and the conditions in which one lives. Action and freedom is therefore necessarily always collective because without others’ support, one would be impotent and powerless (Arendt, 1998: 201). Accordingly it makes no sense to speak of freedom as independent from interdependence.

Judith Butler (2015) has recently discussed this aspect of Arendt’s work and has reworked her notion of action into a more material and embodied performance in which entanglement of the “I” and the “other” becomes central. Butler emphasizes that there is a “we” and indeed a “they” and “it” in all actions and performances (Butler, 2006; Butler & Berbec 2017). This leads to the basic point that it makes no sense to talk about ethics outside the sphere of politics. It is for example inherently difficult to create a good life for oneself without taking into consideration the worldly context of inequality, injustice and exploitation

(Butler, 2012: 9). With reference to Adorno, she asks the question if one can live a good life in a bad life (Butler, 2012, 2015).

Furthermore Butler argues that people are born into a world and enter into it without having made any conscious choice or deliberation. We are thus bound to people, spaces and places we don't know and haven't chosen (Butler, 2015: 106-107). This "unchosen" nature of earthly cohabitation and the open-endedness and plurality this entails is the condition of existence and implies responsibility (Butler, 2015: 111-112). For Butler this responsibility necessarily goes beyond the responsibility humans have to one another and includes also the responsibility that people have in relation to all living organisms and nature.

This point is supported by the material-discursive notion of becoming, which is emphasized by agential realism (Barad, 2007). Barad works from an radical entangled account of becoming in which it becomes impossible to separate this becoming from the historical, spatial and material forces, which made its being possible. People embody these multiple forces. It follows that the others are always "in our skin" (Barad, 2007: 391-392; Anonymous, 2014: 68). These others include relations to material objects, to nature and to the world as well as the human-to-human encounter (Dale & Latham, 2015).

The implications are not only that it makes no sense to separate moral questions from the relations of humans to one another and to what people do in particular historical, spatial and material circumstances. The implications are more radical in the sense that the human and non-human others are implicated in one's actions. The others do not only demand my responsibility. They are also the conditions for my own actions, my own freedom, my own possibilities and so forth. Freedom is not only experienced in relation to others but is handed over from these others and thus also afforded by discursive and material conditions.

From here we proceed into the realm of storytelling and space of appearance.

## FREEDOM AND STORYTELLING

In connecting freedom and storytelling, the entanglement between the “I” and “other” which was identified above is important. This implies as noted that freedom is contingent, relational and collective. Ethics as an act of freedom thus becomes a relational and collective performance in which the “I” and the “other”—including the “non-human other”—implicates one another. As argued below these actions and performances are expressed in storytelling and other artful performances (Arendt, 1998: 50).

The entanglement however implies that these new stories rely on the conditions of possibility of their emergence, the space of appearance. According to Arendt, this space can emerge wherever people are together in the manner of speech and action (Arendt, 1998: 199). It is not an identifiable physical space but can emerge anywhere in the relations between people. The contribution of Arendt to organizational ethics thus lies in the identification of stories as new beginnings and in the emphasis on the spaces in which such beginnings become possible.

To begin the argumentation a further elaboration of freedom is required. For Arendt, freedom and action are the same: “...while one is acting, one is free - but not before or after one acts...” (Arendt 1961: 196). Freedom thus is a performance but not any performance. Action is the particular performance of bringing something new into being (Arendt 1961: 196; Arendt 1998: 178). It is through new beginnings that people disclose their uniqueness and realizes their human capacity.

Freedom is thus tied to the idea of the creative act that leaves a trace behind after physical death (Arendt 1958). She argues that such performances are dictated by principles, which are fulfilled not in any achievement but in the completion of the act itself. In it “...the will and the deed are fused together, are one and the same thing” (Arendt, 1961: 196). The will does not come before the deed but is embedded in the act itself.

Freedom is thus not thus a predication of the principles embedded in action and does not reside in the implementation of any purpose because actually action—because it is collective—rarely achieves its purpose (Arendt, 1998: 184). While one is acting, one is free. Not before, nor after. Such freedom is embedded in storytelling and creative performances. This is conceived as the process by which peoples’ inner passions, feelings, and thoughts are de-privatized and transformed to fit them for public appearance (1998: 50).

Since storytelling is directly linked with freedom and hence politics, storytelling also takes place in interaction with other people and within the historical, spatial and material world in which one is situated. This world in its differential material-discursive composition (e.g. Barad, 2007) provides the affordances for freedom and storytelling. Because action is expressed in storytelling, enacting stories are also the same as being free. No freedom without storytelling, no storytelling without freedom.

Arendt underlines the importance of creativity by claiming that such performances can only be judged by the criterion of greatness because their nature is to break through the commonly accepted and create something new (Arendt, 1998: 205). Creative actions are for Arendt equal to political action in two interrelated but different ways. The first one has to do directly with the action itself as a political activity. The second one is related to that these performances always take place in between people in the space of appearance.

In describing creative actions as political actions, she refers among others to Machiavelli’s notion of “virtu”, which is not the Roman “virtus” and not equal to the word “virtue”. Instead it corresponds to virtuosity, which “... flourishes not in the creative arts but in skill in the practice of an art, and the merit of which lies in the execution of that skill...” (Arendt, 1961: 197). Arendt furthermore turns to the Greeks, whom whenever they wished to explain the specifics in *political activity* used comparisons such “...flute-playing, dancing, the practice of medicine, the profession of seafaring - to arts, that is, in which



virtuosity of the artist was the prime factor” (Arendt, 1961: 197). This is the first meaning of political action. It is embedded in the performance of the art or profession itself as an enactment of one’s unique appearances.

Arendt also turns to Aristotle’s notion of “*energeia*”—actuality—, which again refers to how work exhausts its full meaning in the performance itself (Arendt, 1998: 206). For her this is what is at stake in *politics*: “...the work of man where work means living well” (Arendt, 1998: 207). She identifies this work as *technê* and argues that it belongs among the arts, crafts or professions, which for her equals the greatest activities of people. Arendt’s notion of storytelling thus gives associations to careful, creative and holistic image of work, which is embedded and embodied in Walter Benjamin’s classic figure of the storyteller, which is where the righteous man encounters himself (Benjamin, 1999: 107). Benjamin tries to single out “genuine” storytelling, which is characterized as the natural merging of subjectivity and work, and which he locates in the milieu of craftsmen, artists and artisans (Boje, 2008; Anonymous, 2014).

The second meaning of politics refers to that such stories are relationally and collective enacted. This refers to how reality is crafted through the various entanglements by which we work, live and do things together. It is in other words political in taking place between people and is thus conditioned on the space of appearance. This second meaning of politics is however closely related to the first one. Action and performances have need of an audience before which virtuosity can be unfolded (Arendt, 1961: 197). Performance needs in any case always somebody else to recognize it as a performance (Carlson, 2004: 4). But performance also relies on the political space because this is what provides the affordances for action as noted above. Freedom is therefore inseparable from the spaces in which people are embedded. Freedom comes through a collective, historical, spatial and material world (Anonymous, 2018).

This space of appearance (Arendt, 1998: 198), is for Arendt the place where freedom can manifest itself and become a reality. It is the “mise-en-scene” for freedom to occur in virtuosity (Arendt, 1961: 197-198). The space of appearance is described as “... the space where I appear to others as others appears to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (Arendt, 1998: 198). In such spaces people can appear as unique and different human beings with their own voices, intentions and interests. It is also in such spaces that stories become collective or have the potential of becoming collective.

### **THE POLITICS OF STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS**

With the notions of storytelling and the space of appearance Arendt provides some new building blocks for an ethics of freedom in the form of a politics of storytelling. This implies that organizational storytelling is reconfigured as political action. Butler’s embodied, material and performative rework of Arendt’s notion of action as a speech act, as well as the material-discursive understanding of storytelling that follows from Barad’s work in agential realism, inspires to another understanding of storytelling and the space of appearance, which has important consequences for a politics of storytelling.

First however, attention is turned towards the entanglement and mutual conditioning of the “I” and the “other” identified as a reciprocal interdependence of people, living organisms, nature and material circumstances. People are not alone in the world and their lives are inevitably intertwined, entangled with and conditioned on other peoples’ lives, the natural processes of the earth and so forth. We are obliged to preserve those lives and the plurality, which is the global population and to preserve the earth itself (Butler, 2015: 113). This is the condition of our existence as ethical and political beings (Butler, 2015: 111).

Arendt and Butler thus overcome the dichotomy between the “I” and the “other” through which ethical debates have been shaped. The primary responsibility of people is not directed towards the face of the other in its proximity but to the world and to ours’ and others’—including non-human others’—worldly becoming. The authority of the plurality of existence thus overrules the ethics of the concern for the other as an infinite and unconditional responsibility in times when these concerns are in conflict with one another.

This earthly responsibility begins in the activities in which people are engaged. People are of the world (Barad, 2007) and are therefore indebted to this world. This puts certain demands on how to engage with the world and with our own and others’ becoming. What is the world that is co-created in action? What history is done and what are the possible consequences of our actions. Responsibility to the world implies that we are morally compelled to ask these questions and also to take action. If one has the possibility of acting—of being free—one is also morally compelled to act.

This leads to the second point concerning an ethics of freedom, which relates to action as storytelling. In relation to the organizational literature, storytelling needs reframing. Storytelling is as noted to disclose one’s intentions, motivations, interests and passions. It implies disclosing who you are. When people do that they are “free”. Freedom does not imply the emancipation from discourse, material circumstances, history or politics. These provide the affordances for action and storytelling and are embedded in the storytelling performance. People are free when they can participate in re-enacting, re-crafting and transforming the world. Since action is an entry into a collective world, freedom resides in the performance itself, not in the fulfillment of action’s purpose.

In this ethics, stories are thus not only understood as creative re-descriptions of events that emphasize temporality, plurality, reflexivity and subjectivity (Rhodes & Brown, 2005: 167, 177). They are also more than sensemaking, meaning-making, knowing and memory

normally attributed to storytelling (eg. Boje, 1991; Schedlitzki et al., 2015) and they cannot as such be attributed only to particular ways of knowing that are different from logo-scientific ways of knowing (e.g. Czarniawska, 1997; Bruner, 1996). The point is that storytelling is more than representation and interpretation. Stories are lived and enacted and are hence necessarily also fully embodied performances.

Stories confirm peoples' plural personalities as distinct, unique and free as well as these peoples' participation in organizational communities whatever their position may be. They are not only living in the moment (e.g. Boje, 2008b) but are directed towards transforming the future. Thus they contain within them the fragments of possible futures— of “antenarratives” (Vaara & Tienari, 2011; Boje, Haley & Saylor, 2016).

To enact stories together with others underlines the possibilities of action, which for Arendt is a matter of being alive. To act is to take an initiative and to begin (Arendt, 1998: 178). Rather than being creative re-descriptions of events, stories are rather creative and embodied re-enactments of the differential discursive and material affordances embedded in situations (Strand, 2012; Anonymous, 2012, 2014; Anonymous, 2013). Through these lived performances reality is shaped and not only interpreted (Mol, 1999).

Stories are furthermore relational and collective at one and the same time. Other bodies and material artifacts serve as memory affordances from which stories are made (Strand, 2012). This underlines the relational aspect of storytelling and the fact that the “I” and “other” are always implicated in one another. Stories are collective because they always rely on support and hence alliances, networks and negotiations in order to become part of the collective movement of the organizational storybook (Arendt, 1998: 184).

This leads to the third and final point concerning an ethics of freedom, and which relates to the political space of storytelling, the space of appearance. This implies that the organization has to be translated into an organizational storyboard for enacting stories. This

space needs to be there to inspire men to do the extraordinary. If this space vanishes everything is lost (Arendt, 1998: 206). In this ethics' radical and extreme form, such spaces are characterized as plural and participatory organizational forms and are material-expressive in ways, which metaphorically can be compared with studios, ateliers, workshops or similar spaces where artists, artisans, creators, craftsmen and professionals can perform their stories.

These metaphors take the point to the limit. The key point is the unique appearances in which people disclose who they are. The arts, crafts and professions comprise according to Arendt the greatest activities. They are however only the most "clean" examples of enacting of unique appearances and represent as such the archetypes of what is at stake in politics according to Arendt: *The work of man where work means living well* (see previous section). To this point may be added that other metaphors are needed for creating the spaces in which such performances become possible.

The understanding of storytelling and space of appearance that follows from Butler's rework of action implies that relational, collective and material conditions for actions are emphasized. Story and space come together in ways in which other people and material circumstances are implicated in peoples' actions. Stories and space are thus relationally entangled with one another. There is a "we", "they" and "it" in peoples' stories as noted before. Furthermore these stories rely on collective support and movement without which action understood as mere language would be rather poor (Butler, 2015: 18-19, 45).

Stories contain within them also the material conditions of their emergence: infrastructure, technology, resources, money, other people, architecture, offices, time, division of labour, performance sheets, formal distribution of authority and so forth. Such affordances are necessary conditions are embedded in lived stories understood both as bodily actions and speech actions, which is why even language can be said to be material (Anonymous, 2012: 18-19). In this ways these material conditions have agency in conditioning and affording

peoples' stories (Strand, 2012). They are not however political in being engaged in purposeful and intentional activity (Anonymous, 2017).

Butler's notion of space of appearance is thus more tied to location than Arendt's and thus its particular historical, spatial and material configuration. Butler argues that the weakness in Arendt's notion of space of appearance is the claim that the space of appearance can emerge anywhere and anytime (Butler, 2015: 72-73). For her the specific conditions play an important part because political action needs affordances and has to be supported. These affordances for action are not only part of action but also often what is being fought about (Butler, 2015: 73).

The space of appearance is a relational, collective and material space. People are thrown into this space and have to act from these conditions. History, geography, discourses and material circumstances speak through this space and are re-crafted in stories. Freedom lies in the actions of transforming this space, which was handed over to people. The space of appearance is always there in its potentiality but not necessarily in its actualization. It is thus not a question of whether people are free or not free. Following Butler (2012; 2015) this does not imply however that the possibilities for action and storytelling are equally distributed. The differential distribution of affordances for action are in fact important parts of the ways in which organizations control and regulate the spaces for action, which thus become more or less probable for people, groups, departments or even organizations.

People are co-responsible and answerable for co-creating spaces of appearance in organizations in which people can enact their stories and be free. They are responsible in interactions, conversations, collaborations and negotiations; in short in every actions and relations. But many other structural and material conditions have an even greater impact in regard to the peoples' potential of political action. According to Butler (2006, 2015), we are in the midst of a bio-political situation in which populations are differentially exposed to

*precarity*. Precarity describes a condition of insecurity, uncertainty and exposure. It is important because it reduces peoples' potential for engaging in political action or to live in a space of appearance. Precarity is thus also an important target for ethics. Distinctions can be made in terms of whether organizational life is precarious or if life in general is precarious.

The latter comprises people with little or no access to permanent and stable work and thus to the affordances of organizations. Butler criticizes Arendt for arguing that the conditions of the private space—the conditions of the private household—has little to do with the possibilities of participating in the space of appearance—the public space. This equals according to Butler a suggestion that the basic necessities of life—housing, food, education, transportation and health—have little to do with the potential for political action (Butler, 2012, 2015). For Butler, access to these basic necessities is in contrast to Arendt an important condition for action. In addition certain groups may be identified, which live a more precarious life than others. Women, minorities, certain ethnic groups, refugees, and migrants belong to those groups, who have harder access to spaces of appearance and are also the ones most threatened with exclusion.

In the last part however I will concentrate on how *precaritization* has become an important technology of power in organizations. Precarity has increasingly become inscribed in the governing principles of the state and managerial technologies of companies. The precarity is embedded in "...entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximize one's own market value as the ultimate aim in life" (Butler, 2015: 15). This neoliberal ideology is differentially inscribed into the body and identity politics that organizations perform on their participants to make them perform in particular ways.

The precaritization of organizational life is associated with what Deleuze (1992) identified as a control dispositive, which according to him has replaced disciplinary

technologies of power. The main difference between discipline and control-mechanisms is that the latter do not work in defined, confined and stable systems like the factory or the bureaucracy. Further, they do not materialize in well-ordered hierarchies, functions and classes (Deleuze, 1992: 3-4). Instead their purpose is to interiorize and socialize organizational participants into being bricks and pieces in global market economy where those participants are being assessed or can be assessed according to their value on a stock market to take the point to the extreme.

Instead of rules, guidelines, hierarchies and direct physical surveillance, which locked people up in predictable functions and classes, people are set “free” in exchange for the continuous and pervasive assessment of what value people bring to the organization—both materially and immaterially (Anonymous, 2014). In societies of control, the corporation has replaced the factory and the post-bureaucracy has replaced the bureaucracy. It implies that participants are increasingly self-governed, self-managed and find themselves more in more in new work constellations. Internal competition, salaries according to merit, continuous training and life-long learning, continuous assessment, temporary employment and new work configurations are what characterizes the work in many organizations today.

Within this unstable and dynamic space we find the corporate subject: A subject, who is becoming more and more naked and directly exposed to market forces and the always frightening and threatening speed of change that market exposure entails today. In precarious organizational spaces the individualizing of guilt and blame is reinforced by control mechanisms that expose the human body to the gaze of the others in the forms of measurements and assessments according to hard performance targets but also soft qualitative dimensions like employability, changeability, flexibility, robustness and ability to communicate.



The subject becomes visible and hence modifiable at the same time that the interdependence to the organization becomes stronger. This precarity is thus undermining the potential for political action because these measures create social isolation and because the individual's position is always at stake and fluctuates according to one's market value. This kind of precarity is differentially distributed in organizations. At the same time these organizational technologies comprise more and more people in organizations. Thus in such organizational spaces the subject becomes more vulnerable and thus less likely participants in spaces of appearance.

Next, the conclusions are drawn.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Political action by which one makes one's unique appearances together with a framework for understanding the space within which these appearances are more likely are Arendt's contribution to organizational ethics. It is created in order to resituate the hegemonic relationship between reflexivity and action in order to attain a new balance between the two. This contribution does not overrule reflexivity as important in ethics but construct another more humble position for it. One's political engagement in practices has however to be both reflective and reflexive. Reflection can thus both be directed outwards—towards the activities in which one is engaged—or inwards—towards one's presumptions and prejudices (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005).

Ethical action is thus political action by which one is critically engaged in the material-discursive practices of the world. This includes reflexivity and action in regard to how these material-discursive practices, which one is part of, affect the plurality of existence as well as what subject positions are constructed, permitted and legitimized within these practices. This follows from the entanglement of "I" and "other".

This means that political action not only should be seen as a possibility but as an obligation. All our performances affect and (re-)organize inequalities, hierarchies, and processes of domination and exploitation (Dale & Latham, 2015: 171). Action involves a political stance and judgment. Just as reflexivity must involve action, action must also involve reflexivity in terms of critical attention to how the world is framed and reorganized by action and performances, the truth and justice claims they imply and what subject positions they permit. The plurality of existence of human and non-human others is the ultimate authority to which one is responsible and answerable. This is an important argument against critics, who have suggested that Arendt's notion of action is ethically unrestrained (Cane, 2015).

The responsibility to the plurality of existences needs to be afforded by the space of appearance, which conditions actions. The space of appearance is inspired by the Greek Polis and its associations to a free, democratic and open space where free (wo)men can make their appearance and act together. If this space perishes action is lost. In other words stories in organizations need conditioning and affirmation by a space of appearance. Otherwise freedom and action become less likely.

There are variations in terms of how spaces in organizations enable or constrain action. In any case though, the space of appearance allows us to try to imagine a new type of organization in radical sense of participatory democracy for instance and to reimagine them as spaces, which provide the material and discursive affordances for action and as such invite for creativity, transformation and unique appearances. Organizations are spaces where people can act together and create great stories. But action requires a distribution of power in a more real and material sense. This—the fight for a distribution of power and material resources—may constitute the next ethical battleground of organizational ethics.

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