Hannah Arendt develops a philosophical anthropology where humans are defined by their activities. If one could say that she proposes a distinctive ontology of the human at all, this ontology hinges on its contingency. For Arendt, what it means to be human is so profoundly influenced by one’s living conditions that human beings can lose abilities and properties which in other circumstances might be seen as the defining hallmarks of human existence. She is thus less concerned with establishing what human beings are than with the question what they could be, given the right environment. Outlining the enabling conditions for an authentic human existence, Arendt’s argumentative framework links political action to a profoundly normative claim: people are ‘truly’ human if they can take part in the political sphere, where they distinguish themselves as specific and unique individuals. Political action, which enables human beings to set something new and unexpected into motion, separates human beings from other animals. By acting in concert, they can experience a non-sovereign form of freedom, unique to the political sphere. Problematically, however, humans can also fail to actualise these possibilities.

As I have argued in the introductory chapter, ontologies are closely related to the political and social environment in which they develop. By turning to Arendt, I emphasise that the notion of contingency is itself rooted in the politico-social crises of the 20th century. She perceived the assent of totalitarianism, World War II, and the holocaust as violent rifts or traumata within the seemingly teleological development of modernity. It is under the impression of the devastating political events of the 20th century that she rearticulated the concept of political action. Her notion of the non-sovereign but unique political actor opposes the effects of totalitarian rule and mass society, where the
human ability to act and think ‘for oneself’ is suppressed. To counter the Gleichschaltung of totalitarian rule, Arendt introduces a strict separation between the political sphere and social life.

Arendt’s insistence on the specificity and autonomy of the political sphere and political action has been highly influential for current notions of ‘the political’. Moreover, her notion of the singular political actor enables a timely critique of hegemonic social identities. Her account of the non-sovereign individual, which is more developed than in other theorists of the political, has inspired recent feminist thinkers such as Seyla Benhabib, Adriana Cavarero, and Linda Zerilli who concentrate on the formative and emancipating consequences ‘acting in concert’ has for political agents. Limiting their discussion to action and identity, however, many recent engagements with Arendt’s work have paid little attention to the framework these notions depends upon. This chapter will thus reinsert Arendt’s concept of the specificity of political action into her broader account of human activities. Doing so highlights the difficult relationship between her understanding of the political and her discussion of morality. While I refrain from repeating earlier critiques of Arendt’s understanding of the social, I wish to reinforce their insight that the notion of an autonomous political sphere problematically limits her ability to engage with issues of social justice. Therefore, while Arendt’s concepts of political freedom and non-sovereignty provide an important impetus for my discussion of non-sovereign selfhood, I remain critical of her understanding of ‘non-political’ activities, where Arendt betrays an unwillingness to follow through on her critique of sovereignty in the history of philosophy.

The critique of the modern subject and the vita activa

One central point my reading of Arendt seeks to establish is that a unique personality – ‘who’ one is – is not given. Having a distinct, specific identity is not essential to being human. Identity is not a hidden property that needs to be discovered by introspection. In Arendt’s mind, it is instead created by the unbounded consequences of ‘action’, a term which she designates particularly to human activities in the political sphere. She forwards a conception of political identity where uniqueness is developed through public interactions. People are thus neither ‘born into’ their identities nor are they able to control the forms their identities will take. This amounts to a rebuttal of identity politics, where ‘what’ people are, that is, their social roles as members of a distinct group (women, workers, African-Americans, etc.) would provide them with a