# Towards an ethics of freedom: The politics of storytelling in organisations

#### **Authors:**

Prof. Kenneth Jørgensen<sup>1,2</sup> [0000-0003-1487-9397]

#### Affiliation:

- <sup>1</sup> Department of Urban Studies, Malmö University, Sweden
- <sup>2</sup> Department of Business Management, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

#### E-mail:

kenneth.molbjergjorgensen@mau.se

#### DOI:

10.15249/19-1-420

#### **Keywords:**

Arendt; ethics; freedom; politics; space; storytelling

#### **Abstract**

This article<sup>1</sup> engages with sustainability storytelling from the perspective of freedom. Freedom is discussed in relation to a politics of storytelling that can counter power. Freedom, it is argued, is enacted in genuine storytelling and is experienced between people. The conditions of the possibility of ethics in organisations are thus conditioned on the political framing of the spaces between people in terms of how they condition how people may appear in storytelling and how people together transform these spaces for future appearances. Arendt's ethics of freedom is contrasted with the concept of freedom embedded in neoliberal capitalism and related to sustainability. Genuine storytelling is to bring something new into existence from the condition of plurality and responsibility for the world. Storytelling presumes a space for plural political participation. Freedom therefore also forwards attention towards the material possibilities that allow people to participate and appear as unique subjects. The article ends by positioning Arendt's storytelling in relation to a storytelling model for transitioning to sustainability, which positions Latour's notion of Gaia as the centre of four storytelling cycles.

# 1. Introduction

This article engages with sustainability stories by discussing the relations between freedom and storytelling. It develops an ethics of freedom from Hannah Arendt's notion of storytelling. I argue that her notion of freedom is closely associated with the possibilities of enacting a politics of genuine storytelling that counters how stories are used as tools for dominant power

<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge the excellent comments made by the external reviewers. These comments have been significant for the article's development.

relations to devise corporate identities that perpetuate ecological and social injustices (Deleuze, 1992a). Today, there is a politics of storyselling where stories are used for political manipulation and marketing (Jørgensen & Valero, 2023).

Such storyselling has little to do with genuine storytelling, which is understood as the curious and compassionate sharing of experiences where people come together from the recognition of belonging to a common world (Arendt, 1968, 1998; Benjamin, 1999). A common sense is not individual but is shared in a community and therefore holds potential to disrupt dominant narratives (Holt & Wiedner, 2024; Jørgensen, 2022). Storytelling for sustainability therefore also relies on a sense of having something in common with all the living agents of this world (Jørgensen, 2024; Jørgensen & Fatien, 2025; Swillens & Vlieghe, 2020). Arendt called this sense of belonging to a common world a "Oneness", with a capital O (Arendt, 1968). This concept of "Oneness" suggests that, despite natural, cultural, and personal differences, we share a common human condition (Arendt, 1998).

The disruption of this sense of living in a common world is at the heart of climate denial and the justification of extreme inequalities. For Latour (2018), to land, or to get down-to-earth, is to realise that land was always central in politics. Land was central in the colonisation of countries and nature. Today, colonisation works differently in that it is enforced through controlling people's hearts and minds. Using stories to incline and legitimate corporate exploitation is important, because in modern democracies, power works from the premise that people are free citizens (Foucault, 2003). However, embedded in these 'soft' forms of control, there is always hidden another brute dimension, which lies in the possible economic consequences if one does not play along.

In this article, I explore a different perception of storytelling through Arendt's notion of freedom. The purpose is to develop a politics of genuine storytelling that can respond to a plural world that is nonetheless common, and which can help address ecological and social injustice. I discuss and contrast this notion of storytelling with reference to the idea of neoliberal subjectivity, which is embedded in how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are enacted, and which perpetuates ecological and social injustice. Instead, genuine storytelling plays the voice of conscience and perceives sustainability as true solidarity.

The article proceeds in the next section by contextualising sustainability in relation to freedom. This brings us to outlining the principles by which Arendt positioned freedom as political action. 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 in the 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 where I contrast Arendt's notion of storytelling with the politics of storyselling, embedded in the idea of sustainable capitalism (McAteer, 2019). As a final point, Arendt's storytelling is positioned in a storytelling model for transitioning to sustainability, which positions Latour's notion of Gaia as the centre of four storytelling cycles.

# 2. Sustainability and political freedom

While Hannah Arendt is well known in social science studies for her compelling vision of political freedom (Cane, 2015:55), her writings have generally failed to catch the attention of scholars of business ethics. The notion of freedom is instead used to denote the process of ethical self-formation, following the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1997; Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006; Townley, 1995). Underlining this focus on the self, Foucault emphasised 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 are illustrated by a comment Arendt once made where she argued that the centre of moral considerations is the self, while the centre of politics is the world (Arendt, 2003:153). While ethics for Arendt begins with a relation to the self (Arendt, 1996), it is simultaneously world-centred and focused on the possibilities of action. For her, politics and freedom go together and condition each other. It is something people experience in their interaction with others (Arendt, 2006:148). The dialogues that people have with themselves are important for ethics, but these are conditioned and grounded in a true sense of solidarity with the plurality that is the world (Eiríksdóttir, 2024; Roodt, 2005).

In fact, the 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 called thinking – is politically irrelevant (Arendt, 2006:146). Thus, ethics requires political engagement (Butler, 2012). The ethical implications exceed the demand of the subject to become political (McMurray et al., 2011). It includes attention to the political spaces in which plural people – with Arendt's words – can appear freely before one another with their voices, intentions, motivations, souls, and bodies. Such appearances happen through storytelling (Arendt, 1998:50). Genuine storytelling is therefore conditioned by the dialogue with the self from the condition of love of a plural world. A story is where life and thought become one (Kristeva, 2001).

This notion of ethics corresponds to the promises embedded in the SDGs defined in the Paris agreement (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs are important in putting sustainability on the agenda, and they do represent some kind of common orientation and language that governments, organisations, and institutions can draw on. However, the truth of the SDGs does not lie in the official narratives but in the manifold of small practices through which the SDGs are enacted in practice (Jørgensen, 2002; Jørgensen & Boje, 2010). The myriad of small practices and the patterns they make constitute the truth of sustainability and are important political battlegrounds. In the centre of these battles are organisations, municipalities, communities, people, animals, living conditions, and all the complex and violent histories that belong to places.

Arendt's ethics of freedom is a critique of power relations and entails a hope for a new politics. It thereby provides a different image of organising as a process where free people come together for a common purpose, rather than organising as a means of enslavement

and exploitation of people. For example, Stonebridge (2024) calls *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998) Arendt's love story with the world. Similarly, Kristeva (2001) calls *The Human Condition* a vehement defence of humanism against totalitarianism. Totalitarianism implies the instrumentalisation of people and nature. This entails transforming politics into a question of economy. Arendt argues that while Marxism and capitalism are very different, they share the same mistake of reducing politics to a question of economy.

When organising pivots around the economy, people cannot live a whole life in them, neither as craftsmen, artists, artisans, or professionals, nor as citizens who can choose between a reasonable range of choices. A jobholder or businessman does not live a full political life, but is enslaved by modern ways of organising (Arendt, 1998:198-199). The complexity involved is highlighted by Foucault's notion of power in that he argues that power is rarely coercive but works through manipulating the choices that people can possibly make (Deleuze, 1992a; McNay, 2009). Even if power relations today seem pervasive in organisations, Arendt believed that we nonetheless still carry the original idea of politics at the bottom of our existence. This idea of politics is one of the pearls that she famously argued has sunk to the bottom of the sea, where it awaits the pearl diver to bring it back to the realm of the living (Arendt, 1999:54-55).

Thus, the ethics of freedom, which is enacted in the idea of political freedom, is the ground for a critique of power relations but also points towards new ways of living together from an affirmation of a world that is and has been in all its incompleteness, imperfection, and injustice (Roodt, 2005). The promises of Arendt's ethics of freedom are therefore a grounded ethics of sustainability that makes action against ecological and social injustice possible on a collective scale. It does not presume that injustice will be overcome or go away. As pointed out by Nietzsche, the divine wickedness of the world is what makes beauty and perfection possible (Deleuze, 1986; Nietzsche, 2006). Plurality is divine and wicked, beautiful and ugly, and grand and lowly.

### 3. The ethics of freedom

To construct an ethics of freedom from Arendt's philosophy is challenging and may appear almost paradoxical. She made a clear distinction between ethics and politics, as noted previously, where she hinted that moral philosophy was almost irrelevant without manifestations in the world of politics. By that expression, she did not mean to abolish ethics but rather resituate the hierarchical ordering between the "vita contemplativa" – a life dedicated to pure thinking in isolation from the world – and the "vita activa" – political life (Arendt, 1998:12-15).

Arendt's purpose was thus to attain a new balance between contemplation and the active political life, which for her replaces "the enormous superiority" that contemplation has had in philosophy. Contemplation had 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. Accordingly, Arendt believed that ethics had been concerned with the self without taking the world into consideration. Her ethics therefore also imply a different understanding of the meaning of the world in relation to being.

For Martin Heidegger, for example, the world was a problem that would lead to alienation from pure authentic being (Hill, 2024). Arendt turned it around. She argued that the world is the condition for our existence and therefore requires our attention and care. This understanding of the world is embedded in her emphasis on natality as the human condition (Arendt, 1996). Thus, the newcomer actualises the meaning of the world per se - a view that contrasts Heidegger's view that meaning relies on being-towards-death - the fact that we are mortal beings who can die at any moment (Jørgensen, 2024:94). There are different kinds of birth in play here. For example, she argues that action is like a second birth that confirms the first physical birth. Through acting and inscribing ourselves into history, we confirm that we have been born into this world and are new beginners. But natality also refers to a third kind of birth, namely the birth of human history. This is the time when life philosophies and religions emerged, and where we began to write stories and document history. Thus, storytelling belongs to an era where we became aware of ourselves as part of human and the earth's history, a point she made from one of her mentors, Karl Jaspers (Arendt, 1968). But beyond that, there is birth of life itself or the fact that we are earthbound. The Human Condition is a critique of the modern perception that we can separate ourselves from nature. Through life itself, we remain connected to all other animate and inanimate agencies and conditions of life (Arendt, 1998:2).

Latour (2017, 2018) and Latour and Weibel (2020) capture this kind of birth in the metaphor of Gaia, which I will get back to at the end of the article. For now, it is important to note how natality points to remembrance and the birth and rebirth of life as the ultimate meaning of existence. The importance of natality for sustainability is, for example, also directly expressed in the concern for future generations in the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability (The World Commission, 1987). Arendt's notion of natality therefore implies solidarity with the world. It does not belong to us. We have borrowed it to make our lives, and we are obliged to take care of it and be responsible for it. In the end, responsibility relies on whether we love the world enough to take responsibility for it (Arendt, 2006:193). This love of the world is also expressed in her notion of thinking, which goes beyond reflection and reflexivity, being grounded in conscience (Arendt, 1996; Holt, 2020; Scott & Stark, 1996). The life of the mind (Arendt, 1978) is therefore inevitably tied to societies, communities, and all the lives lived in this world.

Thinking concerns what a person can do and what they cannot do. What is at stake is being a friend with oneself. For example: "I cannot do particular things because having done them I can no longer live with myself" (Arendt, 2003:97). This living-with-oneself relies on thinking about where the being and judging of oneself are performed. She called it "solitude". Thus, thinking in solitude is an inner dialogue – a two-in-one conversation with oneself (Arendt, 2003:98). To think with life is to be fully alive. It is opposed to sleepwalking through life, which is also possible (Arendt, 1978:5). To be free relies on thinking because freedom is to be one with oneself. But because we are part of the world, it is critical that this being with oneself can manifest in the world in ways in which one's belonging to the world can be confirmed (Jackson, 2013). This brings us to how freedom connects with politics.

### 4. Politics and freedom

The challenge in an ethics of freedom is to frame another understanding of what freedom is and how it relates to politics. For Arendt, the very notion of freedom invites intuitive misunderstanding. It is 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. However, Arendt suggests that this view of freedom is misunderstood.

She argues that freedom is experienced in the spaces between people. It is directly linked and cannot be understood independently of politics and action. She notes (Arendt, 1961:191) that freedom is seldom the direct aim of politics, but freedom is the reason why politics 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 living, 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: plurality (Arendt, 1998:7). "Only in death is human existence completely and utterly individual". According to Arendt, people can only be free or suffer the reverse through engaging 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 therefore claimed 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. As noted, she is not referring to the possibility of acting in an unrestrained way. Action is always conditioned on the world, which has been handed over to us and from which we act. Freedom is closely tied to the creative reenactment of this world, but is also tied to people, to nature, and to the world. Arendt's notion of freedom is therefore a relational and contingent freedom. The possibility of action almost always exists in social affairs. However, it relies on the plural others together with whom one is living and the conditions in which one lives. Action and freedom are therefore necessarily always collective because without others' support, one would be impotent and powerless (Arendt, 1998:201; Birmingham, 2002; Jørgensen & Fatien, 2025).

Judith Butler (2015) has discussed this aspect of Arendt's work and has reworked her notion of action into a more material and embodied performance in which the entanglement of the 'l' and the 'other' becomes central. Butler emphasises that there is a 'we' and indeed a 'they' and an 'it' in all actions and performances (Butler, 2006; Butler & Berbec, 2017). For her, it makes no sense to talk about ethics outside of the sphere of politics. For example, it is 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 whether one can live a good life in a bad life (Butler, 2012, 2015).

Furthermore, Butler argues that people are born into a world 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 the responsibility that people have in relation to all other living organisms.

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 conditions. 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. These considerations concerning freedom take us back to the connections between storytelling and sustainability.

# 5. Freedom and storytelling

For Arendt, storytelling is the only true political action because it is where people can disclose 'who' they are as opposed to 'what' they are (Arendt, 1998:176-177; Tassinari et al., 2017). Through storytelling, people intervene in history and become actors (Arendt, 1968; Young-Bruehl, 1977). Storytelling is however tied to the web of relations. Therefore, Arendt's storytelling is not subject-centred but enacted through the web of relations (Birmingham, 2002). Because the ability to make a story out of one's own life is an existential condition of being alive, there are problematic relations between personal and collective interests (Arendt, 1968; Jackson, 2013; Kristeva, 2001). Living life as a story, therefore, implies an ethical positioning as well as social structures that can counter the work of power relations (Jørgensen, 2024).

The affirmation of what made us and which we cannot escape is important. When combined with the work of Judith Butler (2015), ethics is also moved away from an anthropocentric position towards an eco-centric ethics in which people are not only answerable to the plural conditions of human existence but also to the living plural world of animals, organisms, and nature. Butler's rework of Arendt's notion of action as a speech act furthermore implies that stories are seen as lived, embodied, and material performances in which is embedded multiple human and non-human voices (Butler & Berbec, 2017; Jørgensen, 2024).

We are of-the-world as noted by Barad (2007). It works from a radical, entangled account of becoming in which it is impossible to separate this becoming from historical, spatial, and material forces. People embody these multiple forces. It follows that the others are always "in our skin" (Barad, 2007:391-392; Jørgensen & Strand, 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 entanglement between the 'I' and 'other' is therefore important for thinking ethics and freedom together.

Freedom is contingent, relational, and collective. Ethics as an act of storytelling must be thought of as a relational and collective phenomenon in which the 'l' and the 'other' – including the 'non-human other' – implicates one another. The entanglement implies storytelling relies on the conditions of possibility of its emergence, what Arendt calls the space of appearance. This is the space where people are free to tell stories together. It was found in its purest form in the ancient Greek Agora. According to Arendt, a space of appearance can emerge wherever people are together in the manner of action (Arendt, 1998:199). It is not an identifiable physical space, but can emerge anywhere where people come together. These spaces are where natality, the new beginning, can be enacted and disrupt the otherwise undisturbed motion of history.

The contribution of Arendt to business ethics thus lies in the identification of storytelling as a new beginning and in the emphasis on the spaces in which such beginnings become possible. Storytelling is the only true political action. Storytelling is also where freedom is enacted *in situ* because, 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 is a performance but not any performance. Performance can be a simple doing, and people can be enacted into being by power relations (Mol, 2002). True politics is therefore also essentially different from power, because such politics requires an independent actor who thinks and judges for themself. Action is the performance of bringing something new into being (Arendt, 1961:196, 1998:178). It is through new beginnings that people disclose their uniqueness and realise their human capacity.

Freedom is therefore tied to the idea of the creative act that can leave 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 a predication of the principles embedded in action and does not reside in the implementation of any purpose because action – because it is collective – rarely achieves its purpose (Arendt, 1998:184). While one is acting, one is free. Not before or after.

In other words, freedom needs actualisation again and again. It does not exist as such, but emerges by beginning again through storytelling and other artful performances. We are not fully alive when we are not capable of making a story. Natality implies that the only true reason for making stories is because of life itself (Arendt, 1968:89; Didion, 2006). A true story does not have any extrinsic motivation (Kristeva, 2001). Storytelling requires a space of appearance. Therefore, the slave, the labourer, the businessman, and the foreigner do not live in a space of appearance (Arendt, 1998:199). Said otherwise, power relations embedded in organisations do not provide equal opportunities to be seen and heard. Marginalisation and exclusion, alienation, and precarity imply that

not all people have a story that is visible and confirmed within the spatialisation of organisations (Jørgensen, 2022).

# 6. The politics of sustainability in organisations

With the notions of storytelling and the space of appearance, Arendt provides some building blocks for an ethics of freedom in organisations and for a fundamentally different politics of sustainability. Today, sustainability is criticised for being everything and therefore nothing (Farley & Smith, 2020). Farley and Smith argue that the triple bottom line of sustainability entails that major corporations can obtain prizes for being the most sustainable companies through being the most profitable companies. In this way, these corporations actualise Milton Friedman's statement that the social responsibility of a business is to increase its profits (Friedman, 1970).

Friedman is criticised by authors, who view organisations and businesses as parts of society (Freeman et al., 2004; Waddock, 2011). I think that Friedman hits the nail on the head in defining the essence of corporations. He says out loud what is hidden or shrouded. Power normally works effectively when it is invisible and cunning and when it inclines people silently to act in particular ways – in this case, in ways in which profit becomes the primary responsibility of a business. Foucault's notion of the dispositive is a powerful concept because it examines the arrangements and networks among devices that incline certain behaviours in people, seemingly according to their own will (Abildgaard & Jørgensen, 2021; Deleuze, 1992b; Foucault, 1980; Raffnsøe et al., 2016). The dispositive captures brilliantly how power does not work through coercion but through manipulating the choices that people can possibly make.

Following Deleuze (1992a), a dispositive of control is at work in inclining a certain corporate identity when it comes to the enactment of sustainability. This is conditioned on a very different type of freedom compared to Arendt's notion of freedom, namely the freedom of the market. This story of sustainability was there from the beginning of the sustainability discourse. Farley and Smith (2020:6-7) note how there was a change from *The Club of Rome*'s emphasis on limits (Meadows et al., 1972) to the Brundtland Commission's emphasis on the needs of the poor (The World Commission, 1987). While the former emphasised maximum carrying capacity, the Brundtland Commission promoted a growth agenda through the wise and innovative use of resources. Sustainability, in other words, became a matter of technological innovation and entrepreneurship (Jørgensen, 2024:25).

Sustainability became perfectly aligned with the idea of neoliberal freedom. This is evident when the unfolding disaster of plastic pollution is transformed into a great business case by the European Commission (2018). It is manifested in new business concepts, like shared value, that emphasises how sustainability can become a competitive advantage (McAteer, 2019; Porter & Kramer, 2011). The UN report, "Better Business, Better World" (Business & Sustainability Development Commission, 2017), points out 60 problems organised around (1) food and agriculture, (2) cities, (3) energy and materials, and (4) health and well-being. These are problems that are in dire need of innovation

and entrepreneurs. On the front page of the report, an Asian man is depicted together with a boy, who I think is his son. They are in the business of circular economy, digging out the 'gold' in the form of parts that can be recycled from what appears to be old television sets.



Figure 1: Front page of the report "Better Business, Better World" (Business & Sustainability Development Commission, 2017)

Foucault (2008:225-228) pointed out how the figure of the entrepreneur is what separates neoliberalism from liberalism. Storytelling also serves an important part in the neoliberal economy in expressing the soul of the company. But the idea that a corporation has a soul is "the most terrible news in the world" (Bröckling, 2016; Deleuze, 1992a). It entails that storytelling – what Benjamin (1999) argued was among the dearest of our possessions – becomes subjected to the organising principle of neoliberalism, market, and its floating exchange rates (Deleuze, 1992a:5). When we apply for research funding for sustainability, we first must sell our souls to the devil to argue how this can be used to create economic growth. There is no money in degrowth. Arranging the funding system for higher education is part of a dispositive. Research is only 'free' if we accept its underlying market condition.

In this way, sustainability, freedom, and storytelling are disciplined, kept in order, and subjected to market laws. It is discussed in this respect how Foucault's ethics of freedom, which he conceptualised as practices of self-care, comes dangerously close to perpetuating neoliberal practices instead of resisting them (Abildgaard & Jørgensen, 2021; Bröckling, 2016; McNay, 2009). Practices of caring for the self are suddenly subjected to the need to invest in themselves for future return. In Butler's words, neoliberalism works through "entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximise one's own market value as the ultimate aim in life" (Butler, 2015:15). In this way, people are transformed from humans to "human capitals" (Brown, 2015).

### Arendt's ethics of freedom

Arendt's ethics of freedom is an alternative to the enslavement of neoliberal freedom. For her, ethics begins with a person's relation to themself. It can therefore also be accused of perpetuating the power relations it seeks to resist. On the other hand, through storytelling and the space of appearance, we are given concepts to think of a different kind of organising that can work for sustainability. As noted, Arendt believed that true stories cannot be grounded in any extrinsic motivation. Sustainability is one of those phenomena that needs to stand by itself. We need to do sustainability for its own sake and not because it serves the economy. This moves the focus from the economy towards sustainability. This also transforms the economy into a tool and not the purpose of what organisations are doing. Through storytelling and the space of appearance, we might think of organisations as processes that can create new beginnings that can work for sustainability (Arendt, 2006).

This also entails being inspired by the old views of what it means to be a professor, a teacher, an engineer, an architect, or any other profession or vocation. Genuine storytelling is linked to the meaningfulness of what one does. We need to go back to such a view of professions and vocations as serving society and not capital interests. Working in a corporation does not relieve persons from being citizens. For Arendt, professions and vocations can be thought of as practices that create something new as well as continue traditions. A sense of pride through being involved in creating something for the sake of itself is part of what she called work (Arendt, 1998). As noted by Latour (2018), the economisation of life ridicules the past. In contrast, for Arendt (1996), it is memory and gratitude that makes life meaningful. Memory constitutes the foundation for being one with oneself, for thinking new thoughts and creating new beginnings.

Arendt underlines the importance of creativity by claiming that 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 ways. The first one relates directly to the action itself as a political activity. The second one relates to these performances taking place 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. This equals the greatest activities of people. Arendt's notion of storytelling thus gives associations to a careful, creative, and holistic image of work, which is embedded and embodied in Benjamin's classic figure of the storyteller, where the righteous man encounters himself (Benjamin, 1999:107). He located storytelling in the milieu of craftsmen, artists, and artisans (Boje, 2008; Jørgensen & Klee, 2014). It entails a more material understanding of storytelling as something done. It also emphasises the necessary intimate connections between the maker and the made, something which vanished with capitalism's proletarianisation and alienation of work. Alienation does, of course, not entail that stories do not exist. However, they become strictly expressions of 'private' experiences of people who are excluded from political participation and are used to detach themselves from the organisation (Jørgensen, 2022:60).

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 closely related to the first one. Action and performances need an audience before which virtuosity can be unfolded (Arendt, 1961:197). But, as noted, performance also relies on the political space because this is what provides the affordances for action. Freedom is therefore inseparable from the spaces in which people live and work. Freedom comes through a collective, historical, spatial, and material world (Jørgensen, 2022). This space of appearance 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).

# 7.1 How can Arendt inspire storytelling for sustainability?

Arendt's storytelling can be helpful for sustainability. My colleagues and I have attempted to posit Gaia storytelling as a conceptualisation of how to work with sustainability transitions in practice (Jørgensen et al., 2021; Jørgensen & Fatien, 2025). Gaia storytelling is an umbrella term for working with stories from the love of what we, from Lovelock

and Latour, call Gaia – a metaphor for life itself as it emerges in the critical zone (Latour, 2017; Lovelock, 1995). Gaia is the name attributed to what is called the critical zone plus life. Tickell (2007:xiiv) defines Gaia as a What (critical zone) and as a Who (life).

The What is the thin spherical shell of land and water between the incandescent interior of the Earth and the upper atmosphere surrounding it. The Who is the interacting tissue of living organisms which over four billion years has come to inhabit it.

For Latour, the image of Gaia is used to multiply the agencies we must consider when thinking about sustainability. It attunes to how we relate to nature as a process that we are part of, that we are entangled with, and that we communicate with every day (Latour, 2018). It brings our attention to soil, plant life, animal life, biodiversity on a local level and not just on a global level. He believes that we have been deceived by a planetary view of sustainability. While there are feedback mechanisms and ongoing communication among different agencies, there is no idea of bringing harmony or that nature is naturally caring. In fact, Gaia is completely unreliable and a trickster. She does not have any maternal instinct, but can destroy us at any time. Gaia is the primary actor in a climatic regime (Latour, 2018). The idea is that Gaia becomes even more predictable and treacherous the more humans interfere with Gaia's life cycles. Thus, we need to renegotiate our relations with nature. We cannot make peaceful relations with all agencies that make up the world, but we need to realise that we depend on all of them (Latour, 2018). Reconnecting with Gaia and renegotiating our relations to nature are what is at stake in sustainability work. It entails a locally grounded, spiritual, and material practice for sustainability transitions. In one model, we suggest that sustainability work can take place through four different cycles organised around what we call a Gaia theatre cycle.

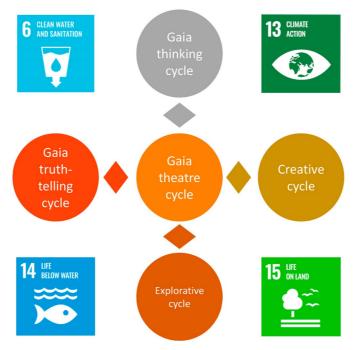


Figure 2: Five Gaia storytelling cycles (Jørgensen et al., 2021:471)

A trick apart from love of Gaia as the driving force is the idea to transform the organisation to think of itself as part of a Gaian theatre of life unfolding differently on different stages and with agents playing different roles. This is a concrete way of allowing organisations to think of how to enact spaces of appearance in ways that correspond to the different parts played by different actors. Thinking is an important condition and always needs to be part of sustainability work. Creativity corresponds to the transformation of how one relates to one's practice as an artist, an artisan, or as done with professional and vocational pride. Exploration is enacted in spaces where people meet and come together around a shared purpose. Finally, the truth-telling cycle covers the organisation's communicative relations with stakeholders. Can the organisation step forward in an honest and therefore truthful way before its stakeholders (Foucault, 2011; Tamboukou, 2012)? The love of Gaia is the driving force without which all our efforts would be fruitless. The love of Gaia is not understood as entailing an idea of living in harmony. Love is understood in Arendt's sense of the word as important for our ways of reconciling with the world as it is. The world is both hard and gentle, loving and hostile, wicked and divine, ugly and beautiful (Arendt, 1996; Roodt, 2005). Love however also implies apprehending diversity and plurality and thus entail a spiritual connection to all the other lives of this world, which need to live as well as possible (Bellacasa, 2017). It is noteworthy that spirituality, according to Foucault (2005), fell in value compared to the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the subsequent economisation of life. Today, natural scientists are beginning to look for what we can learn from Indigenous knowledge and wisdom (Enevoldsen et al., 2024). Storytelling implies spirituality in being where we connect our lives and practices to other lives. Without storytelling, we can never be fully alive.

This is not a sequential model. Rather, the different cycles are entangled and mutually condition each other. The term 'cycle' furthermore denotes that the work on sustainability needs to be recurrent but should also adapt to changing problems and contexts. It can never work without thinking, imagination, and curiosity. Sustainability work is a process. The model collects our ideas of how to organise so that the imagination can go visiting (Haraway, 2016) to create other futures. Paradoxically, this is also done through revisiting the past, what Arendt calls pearl diving into the past, to find what can inspire new ways of being and becoming (Arendt, 1999). The ancient Greek Agora is such a pearl. Benjamin's (1999) storyteller is another pearl. Spirituality is a third pearl. Truth as honesty is a fourth pearl. The pearl in the middle is, of course, Gaia.

The model challenges politics organised according to neoliberal capitalism. A starting point is that sustainability is already there in the hearts and minds of people. It has however been pushed away by other economic concerns that have institutionalised in dominant language, practices, and politics (Jørgensen & Boje, 2010). But there are alternatives to dominant narratives. Through these five cycles, it is possible to disrupt and create new mutations that, over time, can change or even overthrow unsustainable ways of doing things. The five cycles are also insertions into a complex political world where other forces are present. I am aware that actions never achieve their purpose. Change towards sustainability is a question of love and imagination, but also of what is possible in the given moment.

### 8. Conclusion

The article has proposed an ethics of freedom to engage in the politics of storytelling for sustainability in organisations. Arendt's notion of storytelling as a new beginning and her understanding of how this connects with spatial conditions are critical contributions to business ethics. True storytelling is where freedom is enacted in practice. This freedom is relational and contingent on the plurality that is the world, and which is the condition of people's becoming. Storytelling involves a political stance and judgement. Just as thinking requires action, action also requires thinking to attend to how the world is framed and reorganised when we act. The plurality of the existence of human and non-human lives is the ultimate authority to which one is responsible and answerable. It is a condition we cannot escape.

The responsibility for the plurality of lives needs confirmation in thinking and action. I have not discussed this last aspect in this article. Storytelling for sustainability implies spirituality because it is through extending ourselves in time and space that we connect our lives to the lives of others and can imagine other ways of living and becoming. Storytelling and the space of appearance allow imagining new processes of organising that afford creativity, transformation, and unique appearances. Organisations can become spaces where people can act together and create great stories. This however requires a reorganisation and redistribution of power in a real and material sense where people are granted better possibilities to think and to act responsibly.

### References

Abildgaard, A. & Jørgensen, K.M. (2021). Enacting the entrepreneurial self: Public-private innovation as a neoliberal market dispositive. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 37(4). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2021.101179

Arendt, H. (1958). The modern concept of history. *The Review of Politics*, 20(4):570-590. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500034227

Arendt, H. (1961). Freedom and politics. In: A. Hunold (ed.), *Freedom and serfdom: An anthology of Western thought* (pp. 191-217). Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-3665-8\_11

Arendt, H. (1968). Men in dark times. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Arendt, H. (1978). The life of the mind: The groundbreaking investigation on how we think. New York, NY: Harcourt.

Arendt, H. (1996). Love and Saint Augustine: Edited and with an interpretive essay by Julius Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Clark. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition*. Second edition. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226924571.001.0001

Arendt, H. (1999). Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940. In: W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and reflections* (pp. 7-58). New York, NY: Schocken Books.

Arendt, H. (2003). Responsibility and judgment. New York, NY: Schocken Books.

Arendt, H. (2006). Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12101zq

Bellacasa, M.P. de la. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700002096

- Benjamin, W. (1999). The storyteller: Reflections on the work of Nicolai Leskov. In: H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and reflections* (pp. 83-107). New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Birmingham, P. (2002). Heidegger and Arendt: The birth of political action and speech. In: F. Raffoul & D. Pettigrew (eds.), *Heidegger and practical philosophy* (pp. 191-204). New York, NY: State University of New York Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18254362.17
- Boje, D.M. (2008). Story ethics. In: D.M. Boje (ed.), *Critical theory ethics for business and public administration* (pp. 97-118). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Bröckling, U. (2016). The entrepreneurial self: Fabricating a new type of subject. London: SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921283
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17kk9p8
- Business & Sustainability Development Commission. (2017). *Better business, better world.* United Nations. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2399BetterBusinessBetterWorld.pdf [Accessed 2025-07-01].
- Butler, J. (2006). Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence. London: Verso Books.
- Butler, J. (2012). Can one lead a good life in a bad life? Adorno Prize Lecture. Radical Philosophy, 176:9-18.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674495548
- Butler, J. & Berbec, S. (2017). We are worldless without one another: An interview with Judith Butler. *The Other Journal: An intersection of theology and culture.* https://theotherjournal.com/2017/06/26/worldless-without-one-another-interview-judith-butler/ [Accessed 2025-07-01].
- Cane, L. (2015). Hannah Arendt on the principles of political action. European Journal of Political Theory, 14(1):55-75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885114523939
- Dale, K. & Latham, Y. (2015). Ethics and entangled embodiment: Bodies-materialities-organization. Organization, 22(2):166-182. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508414558721
- Deleuze, G. (1986). Nietzsche and philosophy. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. (1992a). Postscript on the societies of control. October, 59:3-7.
- Deleuze, G. (1992b). What is a dispositif? In: T.J. Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault, philosopher* (pp. 159-168). London: Routledge.
- Didion, J. (2006). We tell ourselves stories in order to live: Collected nonfiction. New York, NY: Everyman's Library.
- Eiríksdóttir, L. (2024). Being at home in business education ... with sustainability. Doctoral dissertation, Uppsala University, Sweden.
- Enevoldsen, H.O., Isensee, K. & Lee, Y.J. (2024). State of the Ocean Report 2024. UNESCO-IOC. https://doi.org/10.25607/4WBG-D349
- European Commission. (2018). Press release: Plastic waste: A European strategy to protect the planet, defend our citizens and empower our industries. https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\_IP-18-5\_en.htm
- Farley, H.M. & Smith, Z.M. (2020). Sustainability: If it's everything, is it nothing? London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351124928
- Foucault, M. (1980). The confession of the flesh. In: M. Foucault (C. Gordon, ed.) *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (pp. 194-228). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1997). The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom. In: P. Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics:* subjectivity and truth: Essential works of Foucault. Volume 1 (pp. 281-302). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003). "Society must be defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76. New York, NY: Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2005). The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Foucault, M. (2008). The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2011). The courage of truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freeman, E.R., Wicks, A.C. & Parmar, B. (2004). Stakeholder theory and "The corporate objective revisited". *Organization Science*, 15(3):364-369. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1040.0066
- Friedman, M. (1970). The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. *New York Times*, 13 September. https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/13/archives/a-friedman-doctrine-the-social-responsibility-of-business -is-to.html [Accessed 2025-07-01].
- Haraway, D.J. (2016). Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q
- Hill, S.R. (2024). Beyond authenticity. *AEON*, 18 July. https://aeon.co/essays/what-hannah-arendt-proposed-as-an-alternative-to-authenticity [Accessed 2025-07-01].
- Holt, R. (2020). Hannah Arendt and the raising of conscience in business schools. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 19:584-599. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2020.0147
- Holt, R. & Wiedner, R. (2024). Flipping sensemaking on its head: From common sense to *sensus communis*. *Organization Studies*, 45(9):1253-1275. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406241261438
- Ibarra-Colado, E., Clegg, S.R., Rhodes, C. & Kornberger, M. (2006). The ethics of managerial subjectivity. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 64(1):45-55. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-005-3325-z
- Jackson, M. (2013). The politics of storytelling: Variations on a theme by Hannah Arendt. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.
- Jørgensen, K.M. (2002). The meaning of local knowledges: Genealogy and organizational analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 18(1):29-46. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0956-5221(00)00037-3
- Jørgensen, K.M. (2022). Storytelling, space and power: An Arendtian account of subjectivity in organizations: *Organization*, 29(1):51-66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420928522
- Jørgensen, K.M. (2024). The ethics of sustainability in management: Storymaking in organizations. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003036333
- Jørgensen, K.M. & Boje, D.M. (2010). Resituating narrative and story in business ethics. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 19(3):253-264. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8608.2010.01593.x
- Jørgensen, K.M. & Fatien, P. (2025). Gaia storytelling: Management learning as terrestrial politics. *Organization*, 32(4):547-565.
- Jørgensen, K.M. & Klee, N. (2014). Artisan storytelling and management 'dispositifs'. In: K.M. Jørgensen & C. Largarcha-Martinez (eds.), *Critical narrative inquiry: Storytelling, sustainability and power* (pp. 15-34). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.
- Jørgensen, K.M. & Strand, A.M.C. (2014). Material storytelling: Learning as intra-active becoming. In: K.M. Jørgensen & C. Largarcha-Martinez (eds.), *Critical narrative inquiry: Storytelling, sustainability and power* (pp. 53-72). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.
- Jørgensen, K.M. & Valero, P. (2023). The storytelling and storyselling of neoliberal academic work. In: D. Nehring & K. Brunilla (eds.), Affective capitalism in academia (pp. 95-109). Bristol: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447357841.003.0005
- Jørgensen, K.M., Strand, A.M.C., Hayden, J., Larsen, J. & Sparre, M. (2021). Down to earth: Gaia storytelling and the learning organization. *The Learning Organization*, 28(5):464-477. https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-09-2020-0152
- Kristeva, J. (2001). *Hanna Arendt: Life Is a narrative.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/ 10.3138/9781442675605
- Latour, B. (2017). Facing Gaia: Eight lectures on the new climatic regime. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Latour, B. (2018). Down to earth: Politics in the new climatic regime. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Latour, B. & Weibel, P (eds.). (2020). Critical zones: The science and politics of landing on earth. ZKM, Center for Art and Media. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Lovelock, J. (1995). Gaia: A new look at life on earth. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McAteer, P. (2019). Sustainability is the new advantage: Leadership, change and the future of business. London: Anthem Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvdtpgx2
- McMurray, R., Pullen, A. & Rhodes, C. (2011). Ethical subjectivity and politics in organizations: A case of health care tendering. *Organization*, 18(4):541-561. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508410388336
- McNay, L. (2009). Self as enterprise: Dilemmas of control and resistance in Foucault's 'The birth of biopolitics'. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26(6):55-77. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409347697
- Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L., Randers, J. & Behrens III, W.W. (1972). The limits to growth: A report for the Club of Rome's project on the predicament of mankind. New York, NY: Universe Books. https://doi.org/10.1349/ddlp.1
- Mol, A. (2002). *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384151
- Nietzsche, F.W. (2006). On the genealogy of morality (K. Ansell-Pearson, Ed.; Diethe, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Porter, M.E. & Kramer, M.R. (2011). Creating shared value. Harvard Business Review, 89:62-77.
- Raffnsøe, S., Gudmand-Høyer, M.T. & Thaning, M.S. (2016). Foucault's dispositive: The perspicacity of dispositive analytics in organizational research. *Organization*, 23(2):272-298. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508414549885
- Roodt, V. (2005). Amor Fati, Amor Mundi: Nietzsche and Arendt on overcoming modernity. Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.
- Scott, J.V.S. & Stark, J.C. (1996). Rediscovering Hannah Arendt. In: H. Arendt (J.V.S. Scott & J.C. Stark, eds.), *Love and St. Augustine* (pp. 115-211). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stonebridge, L. (2024). We are free to change the world: Hannah Arendt's lessons in love and disobedience. London, UK: Hogarth.
- Swillens, V. & Vlieghe, J. (2020). Finding soil in an age of climate trouble: Designing a new compass for education with Arendt and Latour. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 54(4):1019-1031. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12462
- Tamboukou, M. (2012). Truth telling in Foucault and Arendt: Parrhesia, the paria and academics in dark times. *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(6):849-865. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2012.694482
- Tassinari, V., Piredda, F. & Bertolotti, E. (2017). Storytelling in design for social innovation and politics: A reading through the lenses of Hannah Arendt. *The Design Journal*, 20(sup1):3486-3495. https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352852
- The World Commission. (1987). *Our common future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development.* The World Commission. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987 our-common-future.pdf [Accessed 2025-07-01].
- Tickell, C. (2007). Foreword. In: J. Lovelock (ed.), *The revenge of Gaia: Why the earth is fighting back and how we can still save humanity*. London: Penguin Books.
- Townley, B. (1995). 'Know thyself': Self-awareness, self-formation and managing. *Organization*, 2(2):271-289. https://doi.org/10.1177/135050849522010
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda [Accessed 2025-07-01].
- Waddock, S. (2011). We are all stakeholders of Gaia: A normative perspective on stakeholder thinking. Organization & Environment, 24(2):192-212. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026611413933
- Young-Bruehl, E. (1977). Hannah Arendt's storytelling. Social Research, 44(1):183-190.