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### Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world

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**Publication date**  
2010

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Borren, M. (2010). *Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. F & N Eigen Beheer.

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## Chapter 1

### Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology: understanding and deconstruction

The attempt to describe Arendt's method meets with two difficulties. First, although she does have a distinct and consistent method, she hardly ever explicates or reflects upon it in a systematic way, as many theorists have noticed with regret.<sup>1</sup> She once conceded in the preface to her biography of Rahel Varnhagen that she felt a 'certain awkwardness in (...) speaking of [her] book'<sup>2</sup>, let alone, she added in *The life of the mind I*, draw attention to her 'method', 'criteria' or 'values': 'all of which in such an enterprise are mercifully hidden from its author though they may be or, rather, seem to be quite manifest to reader and listener'<sup>3</sup>. Still, it seems she sometimes felt this reluctance to describe and defend her method an inadequacy herself as well. In a reply to Eric Voegelin's criticism of *The origins of totalitarianism*, she wrote: 'I failed to explain the particular method which I came to use, and to account for a rather unusual approach (...) to the whole field of political and historical sciences as such. One of the difficulties of the book is that it does not belong to any school and hardly uses any of the officially recognized or officially controversial instruments.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, and this is the second complexity I want to address, Arendt's method of investigating, as she called it, the 'human affairs' differs considerably from the mainstream within the humanities and the social sciences and only matches an undercurrent of interpretative tendencies within both scholarly domains.<sup>5</sup> Most significantly, it aims at understanding political phenomena through the way they appear to those living through

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<sup>1</sup> Vollrath, 1977, 162; Benhabib, 1990, 171; Disch, 1994, 108; idem, 1993, 666; Herzog, 2000, 2-3, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, 1997, *Rahel Varnhagen*, preface, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, LOM I, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, 'A reply', EU, 402.

<sup>5</sup> Think of most methods used in historiography, respectively ethnographic and interpretative paradigms in cultural anthropology and sociology, for instance. What I call the 'humanities' in this chapter include philosophy, historiography, theology, social and political theory, literary and cultural studies.

them, including scholars<sup>6</sup>, that is, through the way they experience and interpret them.<sup>7</sup> Because of this orientation to understanding and interpretation, Arendt's method differs from conventional methods and paradigms within both the humanities and the social sciences. These usually aim at explanation, i.e. finding causes, including motives, i.e. psychological causes of human action, and regularities, such as historical laws, patterns, processes, social forces, historical trends, and the like. In the case of the social sciences, examples include empirical quantitative social-scientific methodological tools to measure and process data, such as statistical analysis and, more recently, computer modeling. In the case of the (non-empirical) humanities, regularities are rather constructed through logic and argumentation: generalization, abstraction, drawing analogies and deduction.

Arendt's method is not external to the topics she investigates, unlike more conventional research paradigms, which put the scholar in the position of an observer over and against the topic under investigation. The latter is reflected in a particular, i.e. empiricist, methodic ideal of scientific objectivity, which prescribes a disengaged stance, preserving a distance between the researcher and his or her topic. According to this norm, the distance or gap between the scholarly researcher and the researched is only bridged in the application of a prescribed method, consisting in a set of tools (instruments, techniques, rules). The Arendtian scholar, on the other hand, is an engaged spectator, someone who lets herself be addressed by what she investigates. Only after this initial address we distance ourselves from the topic we investigate in order to reflect critically. In other words, she takes a second instead of third person stance with respect to the world.

Arendt's interpretative method not simply deviates from the mainstream of social-scientific, logical, argumentative, historic and philosophical methodology, but she is outright critical of them. The aim of this chapter is to reconstruct the hermeneutic-phenomenological method she poses as an alternative.<sup>8</sup> In chapter 2, I will focus on the consequences of this method for her anthropology. In the course of Part I, I will, first, situate Arendt's account of the political in the phenomenological tradition.<sup>9</sup> Second, I will clarify its critical position vis-à-vis a number of scientific and theoretical discourses, respectively the metaphysical tradition (Plato, Descartes, Hegel and Marx), empiricism (the

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<sup>6</sup> In the following, I will include both social scientists, and individuals conducting research within the humanities under the general heading of 'scholar'.

<sup>7</sup> "Verstehen" [spielt] sowohl in sachlicher wie in systematischer Hinsicht eine bedeutende Rolle innerhalb der Gesamtstruktur [Arendts] Philosophie. Ja, man kann sogar sagen, daß das 'Verstehen' das eigentlich zentrale Geistesvermögen in Arendts theoretisch-philosophischen Überlegungen aus 'Vom Leben des Geistes' ist.' (Opstaele, 2001, 102).

<sup>8</sup> Which is a hermeneutical enterprise in itself! Reconstruction always requires interpretation. Cf. Opstaele, 2001, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. §1 and §2 below.

empiricist social-scientific method) and postmodernism.<sup>10</sup> Third, I will try to settle already in the beginning of this study a number of common misunderstandings about Arendt's scholarly approach, especially as regards the appeal to experience and facts and the role that distinctions play in her work.<sup>11</sup>

In the present methodological chapter, I will elaborate the critical, respectively experimental exercises, which are part of Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology (dismantling and storytelling) (§3) and the Arendtian normative criterion of validity (§4). In §5 and §6, I will juxtapose Arendt's hermeneutical phenomenology of the political to two dominant traditions of scholarship, i.e. scientism and metaphysics, and to empiricist, respectively postmodernist conceptions of experience and facticity. Additionally, I will defend Arendt's phenomenological dedication to making sharp distinctions (§6). First, though, I will sketch a brief overview of the phenomenological tradition and method in general (§1) and subsequently situate Arendt's thought within this tradition (§2).

## 1. The phenomenological tradition

Arendt is quite frequently categorized as a phenomenologist<sup>12</sup> and she herself indeed once situated herself as 'a sort of phenomenologist, but (...) not in Hegel's way, or Husserl's'<sup>13</sup>. Arendt, indeed, has never been a phenomenologist in the strict Husserlian sense, though through her philosophical training she was thoroughly familiar with the work of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. She knew both intimately, the first as a student and subsequently lifelong friend, the second as a student and lover. Arendt's phenomenological trait is not infrequently demonstrated through her intellectual debt to Heidegger.<sup>14</sup> This is

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<sup>10</sup> For the conclusion regarding the second aim see the Conclusion of chapter 2.

<sup>11</sup> For the conclusion regarding the third aim see the present chapter, §6.

<sup>12</sup> On Arendt as a phenomenologist, see, among others, the special issue of *Journal Phaenomenologie* on Hannah Arendt 1999, No.11. Andreas Grossmann, 2000, Moran, 2000; Schnell, 1995; Vollrath, 1977 and 1979; Burke, 1997; Hinchman, L. P. and S. K. Hinchman, 1984 and 1991; Ricoeur, 1983; Pulkkinen, 2001; Hull, 1999 and 2002; Taminiaux, 1999 and 1996; Blättler, 1993; Allen, 1982; Vasterling, 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Krueger, 2007; Hart, 2002. On Arendt as a hermeneutical phenomenologist, see: Opstaele, 2001; Ricoeur, 1983, 1989a and 1989b.

<sup>13</sup> Young-Bruehl reports Arendt to have once remarked this (1982, 405).

<sup>14</sup> On this influence, a complete library has been published, ranging from plain gossip to erudite studies. The two best monographies on the intellectual relationship between Heidegger and Arendt to date are Taminiaux, 1997 and Villa, 1996. Other sources include Benhabib, 1996; Keulartz, 1992; Canovan, 1990; Söllner, 2003; Belardinelli, 1990; Burke, 1986; Wolin, 2001; Barash, 1996; Bernstein, 1997; Grunenberg, 2006; Halberstam, 2001; Jaeggi, 1997; Kamarck, 2003; Sozer, 2000; Thomä, 2003; Birmingham, 2002; Hinchman and Hinchman, 1984; Vasterling, 2005.

justified to a certain extent, though this debt should not cloud the profound originality of Arendt's phenomenology. As his former student, Arendt had been exposed to Heidegger's early hermeneutic phenomenology of the 1920s in the formative years of her own philosophical career.<sup>15</sup>

Phenomenology is an anti-metaphysical philosophical method or school of thought, which Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) founded in the beginning of the twentieth century in an extensive oeuvre (the so-called *Husserliana*). Husserl's phenomenology exerted an influence on a whole generation of philosophers, proliferating in many directions, such as *Existenzphilosophie* (Karl Jaspers), existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology and philosophical anthropology. Husserl's former student Martin Heidegger challenged some fundamental assumptions of Husserl's phenomenology. In his groundbreaking book *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Heidegger particularly took issue with Husserl's emphasis on consciousness and what he believed to be residual metaphysical elements in his work. In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger also initiated an interpretative current in phenomenology: hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger's student Hans-Georg Gadamer developed this strand of phenomenology further, culminating in his magnum opus *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Others, such as Paul Ricoeur have further elaborated hermeneutic phenomenology. Twentieth century German philosophical anthropology (Scheler, Gehlen, Plessner) is also heavily influenced by phenomenology. Initially, phenomenology was a German affair, but it soon expanded to France, especially through Heidegger's work, where it ignited the emergence of existential phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir). There it took a more socially and politically engaged turn.

Its many varieties and some more substantial differences notwithstanding, we see many shared motifs and assumptions in the work of the phenomenologists mentioned that are also present in Arendt's work. Phenomenology concerns the descriptive analysis of phenomena, that is, the way things and events appear to us in lived experience. Hence phenomenologists appeal to 'saving the appearances', the things as they appear to us. This is captured in the famous phenomenological motto *Zu den Sachen selbst*.<sup>16</sup> This means that phenomenologists always take a relational point of view with respect to the things they study. According to phenomenologists, the perceiver is not opposed to or separated from the perceived.<sup>17</sup> Things and events are not seen in isolation, as entities or realities external to us, but in their relation to us. The perspective we take upon them as perceivers is

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger developed his hermeneutic phenomenology in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and his 1920's lectures.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt indeed declared to be attracted by Husserl's work in this respect, for its 'anti-metaphysical implications'. LOM I, 9. Cf. Hull, 2002, 82-85.

<sup>17</sup> I will elaborate the traditional metaphysical dualism between the perceiver or subject, and the perceived, or object, that phenomenologists challenge in the conclusion of chapter 2.

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therefore central to the phenomenologist's attention. Arendt's approach is, moreover, not just relational but also perspectival, since she emphasizes the plurality of perspectives human beings take upon the world.

The phenomenological method often takes its starting point in our everyday, pre-reflexive perspective on the world; a perspective grounded in what hermeneutic phenomenologists call *Vorverständnis*, preliminary understanding. Subsequently, it involves the application of the so-called *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, the methodic requirement to bracket both one's opinions and prejudices inherent in preliminary understanding, and the theoretical constructions of the scientific-philosophical attitude.<sup>18</sup> After bracketing, phenomenologists start a careful description of our situated, lived experience of the phenomena, the way things appear to us.

In order to avoid confusion, the phenomenological emphasis on lived experience has no relation to the way (strong) empiricists conceive of experience. Strong empiricists hold that knowledge mainly stems from sense experience; as classically opposed to rationalists who assert that reason is the main source of knowledge. As such, empiricism is the epistemological and methodological foundation of modern empirical science as based on experiment and data. Strong empiricism additionally assumes a direct correspondence between perception and that which is perceived, the object. For them, experience points to a collection of sense data that refer to entities existing independent from the perceiver or observer. For phenomenologists ever since Husserl, on the other hand, the term 'phenomenon' or 'appearance' emphasizes that 'objects' are always things, events, etc. that show themselves to a perceiver. Thus, instead of objects and subjects, they speak of phenomena or appearances: that which appears to a perceiver. These terms refer to the way we enact and live through the various aspects of our lives. Phenomena are always immediately but implicitly meaningful, constituted by implicit understanding based on our familiarity with the world and our know-how; rather than by a collection of sense data. However, they require subsequent interpretation to truly understand them.

Hermeneutic phenomenologists use the notion of world as the meaningful context within which human existence unfolds. For Arendt, the world refers to the typically human world, as distinguished, for example, from nature, the totality of natural things. The notion of world also informs the phenomenological perspective on human 'nature'. Human beings, according to phenomenologists, are worldly creatures, that is, situated beings.

Additionally, most phenomenologists share an interest in philosophical anthropology, i.e. in human existence. They are critical of the belief in and definition of a

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<sup>18</sup> In §5, I will discuss two examples of constructions which are pertinent to science and scholarship: scientism and metaphysics.

universal human nature, an essentialism or naturalism which is customary in the metaphysical and scientific tradition. Instead, they regard humans as situated beings. Arendt, for example, distinguishes between 'who' and 'what' we are. What we are is the sum of our objectifiable features; the properties an individual shares with many others, including markers of collective identity (class, gender, ethnicity, etc.). She is interested instead in who we are, our situated, non-objectifiable and unique life-stories.

Hermeneutic phenomenologists hold that humans are interpreting beings, oriented towards understanding.<sup>19</sup> Everyday understanding is mostly entirely implicit, consisting in 'knowing how' instead of an explicit 'knowing that'. The aim of hermeneutic phenomenology is to appropriate implicit understanding through phenomenological analysis and hermeneutic interpretation.

If phenomenology is considered in a broad sense, Arendt's investigation of the political can be seen as phenomenological in an original, consistent<sup>20</sup> and exemplary<sup>21</sup> way. More particularly, I would describe Arendt's method as a hermeneutic phenomenology of the political or a phenomenological hermeneutics of the political<sup>22</sup>.

## **2. Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology**

The hermeneutic impulse of Arendt's method consists in its orientation to understanding, i.e. to the meaning of phenomena and events in their very particularity, newness and contingency.<sup>23</sup> This interpretive current in Arendt's work is particularly manifest in relation to the phenomenon of totalitarianism.<sup>24</sup> It is accentuated in her well-known and much repeated insistence that the 'desire to understand' animates her research: *Ich will verstehen*<sup>25</sup>. The accent on understanding phenomena through the way they are experienced is nicely illustrated by her introductory remarks to *The human condition*: 'What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. (...) What I propose, therefore, is very

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<sup>19</sup> For hermeneutic phenomenologists, 'meaning' first refers to 'meaningfulness', that is, to meaningful contexts or situations in which human life is always embedded. As such, it is distinct from the logical sense of 'meaning', i.e. 'intelligibility'. The cognitive or epistemological category of intelligibility is, according to hermeneutic phenomenologists, derived from the primary meaningfulness.

<sup>20</sup> Vollrath, 1977, 161.

<sup>21</sup> Schnell, 1995, 241.

<sup>22</sup> Opstaele, 2001, 108: a 'phänomenologisch orientierte Politikhermeneutik'.

<sup>23</sup> Opstaele, 2001, 107.

<sup>24</sup> Among others in OT; 'A reply', EU and UP.

<sup>25</sup> ZP, 46.

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simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.<sup>26</sup> And in the introduction to *The origins of totalitarianism*, she writes:

This book is an attempt at understanding what at first and even second glance appeared simply outrageous. [Understanding means] examining and bearing consciously the burden that events have placed upon us - neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened otherwise.

Understanding thus means ‘the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality - whatever it may be or might have been.’<sup>27</sup>

Arendt’s method is to approach political events through the shared, i.e. intersubjective and worldly, experience of these phenomena. These experiences constitute ‘the true, the only reliable teachers of political scientists, as they are the most trustworthy source of information for those engaged in politics’.<sup>28</sup> Research ‘arises out of the experience of incidents and should ‘remain bound to them; as the circle remains bound to its focus’.<sup>29</sup> Arendt summons the cultivation of a scholarly attitude or ethos of commitment to incidents, events, facts, and appearances and of radical openness to the factual, that is, contingent and unpredictable nature of events:

I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of what we have to say (...); and the only gain one might legitimately expect from the most mysterious of human activities are neither definitions nor theories, but rather the slow, plodding discovery and, perhaps, the mapping survey of the region which some incident had completely illuminated for a fleeting moment.<sup>30</sup>

Events are central to Arendt’s analyses because they disclose or illuminate the meaningfulness of the world in a certain way.<sup>31</sup> What we experience is this illumination. Subsequently, the experiences of disclosed parts of reality require explicit interpretation (‘slow plodding discovery’ and ‘mapping survey’) in order to appropriate their full meaning and significance. Several aspects of this description demand closer inspection by situating them in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. Arendt adopted the emphasis

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<sup>26</sup> HC, 5.

<sup>27</sup> OT, preface, xiv, viii.

<sup>28</sup> OT, 1958, 482.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, ‘Action and ‘the pursuit of happiness’’, 1962, 2; BPF, 6, 14, ‘War and revolution’, OR, 19.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Action and ‘the pursuit of happiness’’, 2.

<sup>31</sup> In some cases, the lives (biographies) of persons may constitute such events. Or in other words, some persons’ lives illuminate the world in an exemplary way. See § 3 below.

Heidegger typically put on the dimension of disclosure, appearance, showing and unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*); respectively disappearance and concealment, in his analysis of what phenomena are.<sup>32</sup> For Heidegger, phenomena appear against a background of concealment, carrying some things into the light from darkness. This process he called world-disclosure.

Entirely implicit, Arendt also adopted Heidegger's emphasis on the worldly nature of human existence. This worldliness was Heidegger's critical response to the Western tradition of metaphysical and scientific thought. He called human being *Dasein* in order to avoid the metaphysical notion of the subject and argued that *Dasein's* primary existential way of being or of relating to the world, others and itself (expressed in the so-called 'existentials'), is *in-der-Welt-sein*, being-in-the-world. Unlike things, human beings do not coincide with themselves, nor are they not enclosed in themselves. On the contrary, they are always already outside of themselves (*Ek-sistenz*), open unto things and other human beings, in the midst of the world and engaged in the world of which they are part, and in their own being. Arendt's conception of the structures of human existence as human conditions is certainly informed by this phenomenological analysis of human ways of being and their primordially worldly existence.<sup>33</sup>

Hermeneutic phenomenologists consider humans as interpreting beings that invariably find meaning in what they experience. Reversely, understanding is not primarily something we do, an explicit intentional activity, such as the scholarly activity of interpretation or exegesis. Instead, understanding is something we are, our mode of being, the way we experience things, events, other people, ourselves, etc. namely as meaningful in some way or another.<sup>34</sup> In Arendt's words, '[understanding] is the specifically human way of being alive', for through understanding, we 'come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.'<sup>35</sup> The scholarly activity of interpretation is dependent upon this existential human condition. Because of our intimate familiarity with and know how of the world, we always perceive something as something. This is called the 'as-structure' of understanding.<sup>36</sup> To use one of Heidegger's examples: it is simply impossible for us to encounter 'mere noise' (*reines Geräusch*). Instead, we hear loud music, industrial noise etc. We experience an event as either a natural event (for example rain or storm), or a social event (such as a party) or a political event (for example a debate in

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<sup>32</sup> *Sich zeigen, offenbaren, erscheinen*, etc. Schnell, 1995, 226-31.

<sup>33</sup> Vasterling, 2007c.

<sup>34</sup> Ramberg, 2005, §4.

<sup>35</sup> UP, 308.

<sup>36</sup> Schnell, 1995, 274: 'Eine Deutung legt fest, *als* was bestimmte Sachverhalte betrachtet werden, wie sie gedeutet werden sollen, dürfen und nicht werden dürfen.'

parliament or a revolution), etc. ‘Aus der menschlichen Welt ist die Deutung dieser Welt nicht wegzudenken. Es gibt keinen Vorgang der Welt, der nicht einer Deutung unterliegt. (...) Prozesse laufen nicht wie Regenschauer ab, sie werden stets in bestimmten Weisen interpretiert.’<sup>37</sup> Experience is embedded in our practical dealings with the world and with other people. To experience something means that something emerges or stands out as this or that in our practical dealings. ‘Our understanding of the world presupposes a kind of pragmatic know-how that is revealed through the way in which we, without theoretical considerations, orient ourselves in the world.’<sup>38</sup> Hermeneutic phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Gadamer call this implicit, pre-reflexive understanding that we all possess *Vorverständnis*. We do not need to have objective theoretical knowledge of the construction of, say, a hammer, in order to be able to use it. Heidegger calls the practical modes of relating to things in the world, on the one hand, and to other people, on the other hand, respectively *besorgen* and *Fürsorge*. Through these, the world is ‘familiar to us in a basic, intuitive way’ and ‘tacitly intelligible to us.’<sup>39</sup> In other words, we always have an immediate, intuitive, implicit and non-reflective, understanding of the things, events and other people in the world. Explicit, reflective understanding, including philosophical and scientific understanding, is rooted in this prior implicit understanding, i.e. in presuppositions, or, in hermeneutic terms, the ‘fore-structure’ of understanding. What explicit understanding does is to ‘articulate and confirm what preliminary understanding (...) sensed to begin with’, Arendt writes.<sup>40</sup> For this reason, hermeneutic phenomenologists emphasize the circular structure of understanding and judging.<sup>41</sup> The so-called hermeneutic circle only starts when a phenomenon engages us. It is only when something unexpected happens, when things break down or when for other reasons our attention is awakened, that the automatic pilot of everyday implicit understanding makes place for the circle of explicit understanding or interpretation. Arendt emphasizes the essential role taste plays in eliciting our engagement and thus in triggering the hermeneutic process in the first place. Taste is our faculty for immediately discriminating between what appeals to us and what does not. Indeed, many phenomena or events simply do not touch and engage us and leave us indifferent. In those cases, the catalyst for the process of acquiring explicit understanding is simply absent.

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<sup>37</sup> Schnell, 1995, 274.

<sup>38</sup> Ramberg, 2005, §4.

<sup>39</sup> Ramberg, 2005, §4.

<sup>40</sup> UP, 322.

<sup>41</sup> In UP, Arendt describes understanding in terms very similar to the ones she uses in other writings to describe judgment: ‘... understanding [is] (...) closely related to and inter-related to judging’ (313). In both common sense and imagination play important roles. I guess understanding could best be regarded as the prerequisite of judgment: without the prior process of understanding, no judgment can arise. In this dissertation, therefore, I use understanding and judging interchangeably.

Whenever a phenomenon does affect us, the hermeneutic circle is opened. It starts with a careful, phenomenological, analysis of the lived experience of the world which is full of uncritical, pre-reflexive and prejudiced understanding of meaning. Subsequently, we need to distance ourselves from these prejudices (and scientific generalizations and ideologies, for that matter, Arendt stresses) through critical examination of them. Finally, we return to a better, elucidated version of the implicit understanding we started with, which is explicit understanding or interpretation in the full hermeneutic sense. This is a perpetual process, indeed, a circle. Understanding, Arendt writes, is a contingent and open-ended process, 'in constant change and variation' which never produces unequivocal or final results.<sup>42</sup> It consists in an 'interminable dialogue' between the thinking ego and the events and phenomena of the world and therefore inevitably 'turns in circles'. But it is not vicious circle, as logicians have it, she argues.<sup>43</sup> Note that preliminary understanding includes prejudices and traditional mores, 'our commonly accepted prejudices and judgments'<sup>44</sup>. Hermeneutic phenomenologists are aware of the danger this implies. Arendt, for example, points to the tendency of common sense to turn a blind eye to new, unexpected and unprecedented events, by reducing them to what is already familiar. However, preliminary understanding is the only source available to attain explicit understanding, according to hermeneutic phenomenologists.<sup>45</sup>

Arendt accords a special role to the faculties of imagination and storytelling in the process of critical reflection. Whereas specific triggers, i.e. taste or the shock of the new, engages us with phenomena, imagination mediates our experience of phenomena by distancing us from some and approximating other aspects, dependent upon the context.

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding, for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact.<sup>46</sup>

Imagination allows us, first, to take distance from our own emotions and affects and the immediate sensory experience of phenomena no longer present or events no longer happening. Second, by calling upon common sense, it allows us to make present to

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<sup>42</sup> UP, 307-08.

<sup>43</sup> UP, 322.

<sup>44</sup> Arendt, 'Philosophy and politics', 1990, 100.

<sup>45</sup> UP, 310-11.

<sup>46</sup> UP, 323.

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ourselves what is absent, to ‘enlarge one’s mentality’. This means taking into account the plural (possible) perspectives of as many others as possible; resulting in representative thinking or judgment.<sup>47</sup> Storytelling is concerned with the reflective, critical exposition of the meaning of something, as I will explicate shortly.<sup>48</sup>

For Arendt, the hermeneutic circle implies the co-dependency of human existence and world. Our self-understanding and understanding of the world are mutually conditional and *gleichursprünglich*, co-original. The one does not precede the other, but they mutually inform each other. Thus, there is no fully formed self - a subject in the possession of self-knowledge - that encounters an independent external reality (object) that it subsequently starts to investigate and understand. ‘[We] simply cannot understand ourselves without the detour through the world, and the world cannot be understood without reference to [our] way of life.’<sup>49</sup>

Let me summarize the general features of the hermeneutic-phenomenological method of understanding. Understanding is first and foremost practical, situated, worldly and circular. It is practical and situated in so far as it presupposes engagement in and familiarity with the everyday world. Understanding is concerned with the meaning of human existence because of the ‘as-structure’ of understanding and presupposes an engaged spectator. Scientific explanation and philosophical understanding are secondary with respect to this prior practical engagement and familiarity with the world. The ‘fore-structure’ of understanding implies that all explicit understanding starts with *Vorverständnis*, preliminary understanding. Understanding is worldly, because it refers to the human condition. Finally, understanding is always engaged in a hermeneutic circle: starting with uncritical, pre-reflexive *Vorverständnis*, through critical explication to explicit understanding.

Methodically, Arendt’s debt to Heidegger not only concerns understanding, but also de(con)struction<sup>50</sup> of metaphysical concepts and genealogy.<sup>51</sup> She adopts his appreciation of the phenomenal origins of philosophical ideas and concepts and his concomitant historical genealogy of these notions and the way the phenomena have become concealed in the course of time.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Arendt’s phenomenological analyses ‘attempt to uncover the experiences that underlie [concepts] in order to achieve a better understanding of the

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<sup>47</sup> On enlarged mentality or *erweiterte Denkungsart*, see, among others, Arendt, ‘The crisis in culture’, BPF, 220-21 and ‘Truth and politics’, BPF, 234-35; 241.

<sup>48</sup> See § 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ramberg, 2005. I will elaborate Arendt’s hermeneutic method of understanding in the last part of §3.

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger calls it *Destruktion* or *Abbau*; Arendt calls it ‘dismantling’.

<sup>51</sup> Taminaux, 1997, 199; Villa, 1996, 114, 154-55.

<sup>52</sup> Taminaux, 1999; Hull, 2002, 84. With respect to Heidegger’s genealogical motive and his concern with origins, see especially *Sein und Zeit*, 2001 [1927], §6; Bernasconi, 2000b, 3.

phenomena they refer to.<sup>53</sup> Although Arendt's hermeneutical phenomenological method of deconstruction is certainly indebted to Heidegger, this debt is in no way scholastic.<sup>54</sup>

The feature of Arendt's phenomenology that stands out in comparison to the other phenomenologists mentioned, is that she investigated the political implications of our worldliness. She extended the German phenomenological tradition in that the lived experience of political events is the focus of her work.<sup>55</sup> She is mainly interested in understanding political phenomena, events and experiences, that is, more concretely, in public space and facts. These political phenomena consist in 'human actions and that which is produced by these actions among men, things, and relationships'<sup>56</sup>, such as revolution, freedom, violence, power, authority, means and ends, the social and the political, rule, etc. By stressing plurality and showing that appearing is always an appearing-of-someone-or-something-to-others, Arendt has maybe more than any other phenomenologist of her generation analyzed the intersubjective and inter-active nature of our being-in-the-world and avoided the unwitting solipsism or subjectivism of, in particular, Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenologies.

### **3. Hermeneutic exercises**

Arendt's work consists in 'essays' or 'exercises in understanding'.<sup>57</sup> The process of understanding for her is double-sided. It has the critical dimension of deconstruction and the experimental dimension of storytelling. Critique is directed towards the past, the given

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<sup>53</sup> Vasterling, 2007a, 85.

<sup>54</sup> Taminiaux, 1997, 199. Villa argues that Arendt's deconstruction of the metaphysical legacy in the tradition of political philosophy method 'goes one step farther – or deeper – than Heidegger's. Her 'destruction' of the Western tradition of political philosophy returns us not to the originary (speculative) sources of a presence subsequently reified as a constant presence by metaphysics, but rather to an experience of the being of appearance drawn entirely from the plural, doxastic, and public dimensions of praxis. (...) What is lacking in Heidegger (...) is an appreciation of the political context in which Plato initiates the degradation of appearance and the reification of truth as correspondence.' (155; cf. 114, 151, 154). I will elaborate Arendt's deconstructive method in the first part of §3.

<sup>55</sup> French phenomenologists have always been more politically interested than the German; i.e. Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Beauvoir, Ricoeur. Though Arendt fits the French phenomenological tradition better, she does not explicitly relate to the work of these philosophers, with the exception of Sartre whose work she discussed quite negatively 'On violence', CR.

<sup>56</sup> Vollrath, 1977, 166.

<sup>57</sup> Or 'exercises in political thought', the subtitle of BPF. Essays or exercises in understanding may be taken as a shorthand description of Arendt's hermeneutics.

order; experiment towards the future; the new and unexpected which defies the given.<sup>58</sup> Still, the critical and experimental moments of understanding are connected for Arendt. Critique without experiment results in cynicism ('debunking'<sup>59</sup>), she thought, whereas experiment without critique tends to utopianism. Critique always also has an experimental dimension and meaningful experiments, on the other hand, never create something entirely new: 'Nothing can be true which is altogether new.'<sup>60</sup> Critique and experiment are aspects of all essays and exercises in understanding, though to different degrees. Some of her writings are more critical than experimental, and some the reverse.

***Critique: dismantling***

Towards the end of the first book of *The life of the mind*, Arendt concedes: 'I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today.'<sup>61</sup> The objective of critique in Arendt is the deconstruction, or 'dismantling'<sup>62</sup> or 'critical re-examination'<sup>63</sup>, as Arendt calls it, of the Western metaphysical legacy in political thought. On the one hand, it is directed to the metaphysical prejudices regarding the active life, or, as Arendt calls it, the *vita activa*; on the other hand, to the metaphysical fallacies regarding the life of the mind. I will discuss Arendt's critical deconstructions of both modes in which the metaphysical legacy has been handed down and her critical method.

Arendt's aim is to do justice to political life and the *vita activa* more generally, as a non-derivative, original and important dimension of human existence, and to save it from the metaphysical prejudices, or the imposition of the lifestyle of metaphysicians onto the political. The most fundamental prejudice may be the 'traditional substitution of making for acting'.<sup>64</sup> Acting, the political activity *par excellence* for Arendt, concerns plural, contingent and open-ended human action and speech. Because of these features, action has unpredictable, incontrollable and irreversible results. For this reason, the temptation often arises to replace it by an activity that does produce predictable results, by binding the political to means-ends patterns and to models executed by clearly recognizable agents. This activity is what Arendt calls 'working' or 'making'. Related prejudices include the

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<sup>58</sup> 'Preface', BPF, 14.

<sup>59</sup> 'Projektbeschreibung für die Rockefeller Foundation', December 1959, WiP, 200.

<sup>60</sup> 'Preface', BPF, 15; 'Action and 'the pursuit of happiness'', 1962, 3; Arendt quotes Jaspers here.

<sup>61</sup> LOM I, 212.

<sup>62</sup> LOM I, 212.

<sup>63</sup> 'Projektbeschreibung für die Rockefeller Foundation', December 1959, WiP, 200.

<sup>64</sup> HC, §31. Cf. HC, §26; WiP; 'On humanity in dark times', MDT.

definition of politics as rule; the identification of violence and power; and the idea that politics is an affair of the few, or even the one; the strong solitary ruler, i.e. Plato's philosopher-king or the sovereign monarch, including the dictator and the *Führer*. Arendt's way of dismantling these prejudices is not through negation, since negation always somehow remains dependent on the discourse of that which it strives to negate instead of transforming it. 'Die Destruktion (...) muß (...) den Begriff, den es zu destruieren gilt, gerade anerkennen, anerkennen in der Legitimität seiner historisch gewordenen Herrschaft. Destruktion ist niemals negierende Abschaffung, sondern Unterstellung der bislang fraglosen Herrschaft unter einen anderen Horizont durch Aufdeckung der Herkunft.'<sup>65</sup> Instead, her deconstructive method concerns a genealogical investigation of the way the history of political experiences and phenomena are condensed or sedimented in language; that is, either revealed or concealed in traditional political concepts.<sup>66</sup> Concepts provide a privileged access to political experiences and phenomena, 'not because [they] reveal the phenomenon in any straightforward way, but because [they] carry the record of past perceptions, true or untrue, revelatory or distorting.'<sup>67</sup> The aim of such a genealogical project is to disclose or lay bare particular experiences, the 'spirit' and meanings, the 'phenomenal reality' underlying these political concepts.<sup>68</sup> Subsequently, she offers a phenomenological description of their relevance to specific - often conflicting - experiences in the context of the active life, most notably acting, on the one hand, and making or work, on the other hand. Most of the time, Arendt argues, philosophical concepts either express generalizations of particular phenomenal experiences of the political, or amalgamations of different phenomenal experiences. Her deconstructions of the metaphysical prejudices therefore, again, have two sides: a destructive or critical and an experimental one. After making manifest generalizations and amalgamations, she criticizes them, and subsequently introduces phenomenological distinctions to save the experiences covered up by them.<sup>69</sup> In an application for a research grant in 1959, she described her approach as follows:

I shall try to find out where [traditional concepts and conceptual frameworks of political thinking] came from before they became worn-out coins and abstract generalizations. I therefore shall examine the concrete historical and generally political experiences which originally gave rise to political concepts. For the experiences behind even the most worn-out concept remain valid and must be

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<sup>65</sup> Vollrath, 1979, 29.

<sup>66</sup> WiP, 200-01; Cf. 'Preface', BPF, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Young-Bruehl, 1982, 405.

<sup>68</sup> 'Preface', BPF, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Taminioux, 1997, 199; Villa, 1996, 114.

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recaptured and re-actualized if one wishes to escape certain generalizations that have proven pernicious.<sup>70</sup>

Like most phenomenologists, Arendt declares that metaphysics has ‘fallen into disrepute’ up to the point of its death.<sup>71</sup> It is not that the big metaphysical questions have become senseless and meaningless, nor is our capacity for thinking corrupted, she holds, but the framework in which people attempted to raise and answer these questions has lost its plausibility. Metaphysical fallacies are misconceptions concerning the nature of the life of the mind, in that they disregard the tension between mental activities and the world. Taminaux has called this tension ‘the paradox of belonging and withdrawal’.<sup>72</sup> Usually and most of the time, we are completely immersed in the world. Men-as-citizens move among the plurality of their fellow citizens, and consequentially cannot ignore the huge diversity of perspectives on the world. Arendt was convinced, on the one hand, that in the relatively exceptional moments when people are thinking – as distinguished from laboring, working, acting or speaking - they need to withdraw from the visible and plural world of appearances into the invisibility, a-phenomenality and temporary solitude of their inner world. While thinking, one’s attention turns inward and is not directed outward anymore. During the course of thinking, one leaves behind the plurality of the world and moves among a duality: the inner dialogue between me and myself. When thinking, one is alone with oneself and never more than ‘two-in-one’, according to Arendt.<sup>73</sup> In the state of wonder - which philosophers ever since Plato have regarded as the condition of possibility of thinking - this duality is even reduced to a singularity, ‘as though not men but Man inhabited the earth’<sup>74</sup>. On the other hand, the thinker also belongs to the world, and is bound to the human conditions. Despite the thinker’s withdrawal from the world, Arendt underlines, there is no escape from the plural world of appearances, nor should the thinker pursue so.<sup>75</sup> No matter how hard they try, neither the professional philosopher<sup>76</sup>, nor the

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<sup>70</sup> WiP, 200-01.

<sup>71</sup> Also: the ‘end’, ‘demise’ or ‘crisis’ of metaphysics (LOM I) or: ‘the thread of tradition is broken’ (see the conclusion to this chapter below).

<sup>72</sup> Arendt introduces the term ‘metaphysical fallacies’ in LOM I, 12; cf. 23.

<sup>73</sup> For Arendt’s account of thinking as ‘two-in-one’ or as ‘the inner dialogue between me and myself’, see, among others: OT, 476; ‘On the nature of totalitarianism’, EU, 358, 359; ‘Concern with politics in recent European thought’, EU, 144; ‘Philosophy and politics’, 84-90, 101; ‘The crisis in culture’, BPF, 219-21; ‘Truth and politics’, BPF, 244-45; DB, 688, 695; ‘Thinking and moral considerations’, 1971, 439-444; LOM I, 179-196.

<sup>74</sup> LOM I, 47. Note that the phrase ‘the fact that men not Man, live on the earth and inhabits the world’ is Arendt’s shorthand definition of plurality in HC, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Aristotle’s similar correction of the Platonic bias in Taminaux, 1997, 53.

<sup>76</sup> LOM I, 23-24.

scientist<sup>77</sup> can escape appearance.<sup>78</sup> The withdrawal from the world as the space of appearances into invisibility is inevitably relative, temporary and incomplete, since no one can escape living in the world absolutely. We always remain worldly creatures, inhabiting the world with others. So, man-as-thinker participates 'in two distinct and incommensurable realms of experience, the life in the world and the life of the mind' at once.<sup>79</sup> We live in 'the paradoxical condition' that though we are ourselves 'part of the world of appearances', we are 'in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or to transcend it.'<sup>80</sup> In other words, thinking needs to do justice to two conditions at once which are seemingly incompatible. Though thinking requires withdrawal from the world of appearances and the plurality of action and speech, it still has to do justice to these conditions. As long as we do not occasionally 'stop and think' we risk a complete absorption in the world of human affairs and quotidian routines and lack the critical distance needed to avoid conformism to 'what everybody else does and believes in' and the distance required for judgment.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, thinking can never escape the world and should be committed to worldly phenomena. 'Our mental apparatus, though it can withdraw from *present* appearances, remains geared to Appearance.'<sup>82</sup>

The tension between the life of the mind and belonging to the world cannot be resolved and hence the thinker should endure it. Still, professional philosophers have tried to resolve the tension. They totalize the one experience - withdrawal from the world - at the expense of the other - belonging to the world. Metaphysicians have not been able to resist the temptation to solve the paradox of thinking. They have generally sought to undo it by totalizing the a-phenomenality and solitude of thinking into a way of life, the βίος Θεωρητικός or *vita contemplativa*. This brought about a number of biased conceptions concerning human existence and the activity of thinking. Arendt calls these biased conceptions metaphysical fallacies. Since professional thinkers spend the majority of their time in the invisibility of thinking, they are more prone to these fallacies than other people. The extra-ordinary experience of thinking invokes in them the illusion that the non-appearing, invisible interiority is more fundamental and true than the appearances.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> LOM I, 53.

<sup>78</sup> As to the issue of how to discern between true appearances and lies, errors, illusions, deception, hypocrisy, see LOM I, 26; 36-37. On the relation between appearance and semblance: 37-40.

<sup>79</sup> Canovan, 1992, 264.

<sup>80</sup> LOM I, 45.

<sup>81</sup> LOM I, 192.

<sup>82</sup> LOM I, 24.

<sup>83</sup> LOM I, 44-45.

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However, the paradox of belonging and withdrawal, Arendt holds, should be endured. Metaphysicians from Plato to Heidegger, however, have always sought to overcome or solve this paradox. They tend to take their abode in the singularity of wonder. Their mistake has been the one-sided appreciation of withdrawal from the world, and their denial of the indissoluble relation to belonging to the world.<sup>84</sup> Whenever thinking is identified with wonder, however, the return to the plurality of the world which thinking demands, is postponed endlessly. Wonder then loses its character of sojourn in the daily maelstrom of encounters, activities and opinions. Hence, these philosophers have given rise to metaphysical fallacies.

Before starting a brief exposition of these fallacies, I would want to stress that Arendt's dismantling of the metaphysical fallacies is far from debunking metaphysics. Unlike errors, fallacies are not simply senseless, nor are they for logical mistakes. They contain real experiences and even sound insights. Arendt thought that professional philosophers do provide important insights in the activity of thinking. Fallacies are always partially meaningful and insightful. So, for example, she agrees with Plato that solitude is a necessary condition for thinking. And she agrees that without wonder, which questions 'den Alltäglichen, den Selbstverständlichen, den durchaus Gekannten und Bekannten',<sup>85</sup> philosophy is impossible.

The four metaphysical fallacies Arendt identifies are two-world theories; solipsism; the identification of truth and meaning and the internal warfare between thinking and common sense. The first, oldest and most fundamental fallacy is the so-called 'two-world theory': the dissolution of the world in a true and an apparent one, or in classical metaphysical terms, in Being and appearance. These two worlds do not only constitute a dichotomy, but also a hierarchy, i.e. the first of them is supposed to be of a higher rank than the latter. Behind the chaotic and inconstant world of mere appearances, a more fundamental, constant and true Being is postulated which is of a higher order. According to two-world theories that which does not appear to the senses is more valuable and true than that which does appear. The non-appearing is supposed to be not just beyond, but above the world of appearances and the senses.<sup>86</sup> The guiding assumption is that appearances 'must have grounds that are not appearances' themselves.<sup>87</sup> The being-

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<sup>84</sup> 'Arendt's denunciation of the metaphysical fallacies does not consist at all in denouncing the paradox of belonging to and withdrawal from appearances, but quite on the contrary in putting value upon it and assuming it. There is a fallacy when the paradox, far from being recognized as such, is covered over.' (Taminiaux, 1997, 132).

<sup>85</sup> 'Heidegger ist 80 Jahre', Ludz, 1998, 187.

<sup>86</sup> LOM I, 10, 23.

<sup>87</sup> LOM I, 24. Arendt is quoting Kant here.

appearance dichotomy gives rise to a host of derivative dichotomies, such as the supremacy of the ground, foundation or essence, over surface<sup>88</sup>; of the inside or inner life, soul, psyche, self or motives over the outside, outward appearance or outward phenomenal manifestation<sup>89</sup>, including the body and action<sup>90</sup>; and of cause over effect<sup>91</sup>. The essential lies beneath the surface, the deeply ingrained prejudice goes, and the surface is 'superficial'<sup>92</sup>. Classical examples of this tendency are Plato's dichotomy of Ideas versus semblances and Descartes' *res cogitans* versus *res extensa*.<sup>93</sup>

What is the partial insight or validity of the two-world fallacy? Two-world theories reflect the fundamental experience we have of being when we are absorbed in thinking, which is the experience of a discrepancy between words and appearance; between 'the medium in which we think' and 'the medium in which we live'; in short, between the mind and the world.<sup>94</sup> It is this experience accompanying the thinking process which has started the project of metaphysics.<sup>95</sup> Problems occurred as soon as professional thinkers made their thinking experience absolute by reifying the distinction between the thinking self and the world, delegating them to separate and hierarchically ordered realms and according them different values.

Arendt's strategy of deconstruction is not to reverse the metaphysical hierarchy of true Being over mere Appearance, but to assert the coincidence of appearing and being.<sup>96</sup> '[H]umanly and politically speaking [reality] is the same as appearance. To men, the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all.'<sup>97</sup> She agrees with Aristotle that 'what appears to all, this we call Being' and subsequently argues that 'whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality.'<sup>98</sup> The dualism of being and appearance is obsolete,

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<sup>88</sup> LOM I, 27.

<sup>89</sup> HC, 74.

<sup>90</sup> LOM I, 30.

<sup>91</sup> LOM I, 25.

<sup>92</sup> LOM I, 27.

<sup>93</sup> LOM I, 46-49; HC, 252 and further. Though primarily associated with Plato's idealism, Heidegger, for that matter, does not completely escape this metaphysical fallacy despite his phenomenological destruction of metaphysics, Taminiaux argues. Taminiaux, 1997, 52. Cf. 60-61, 69, 74. This metaphysical fallacy is closely related to another one, the intramural warfare between thought and common sense; see below.

<sup>94</sup> LOM I, 8.

<sup>95</sup> LOM I, 8.

<sup>96</sup> LOM I, 19; cf. LOM I, 23; 'The social question', OR, 98. Cf. Villa, 1996, 150-52.

<sup>97</sup> HC, 199.

<sup>98</sup> HC, 199. Cf. 'In the realm of human affairs, being and appearance are indeed one and the same.' (OR, 98); 'In this world which we enter, appearing from nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*.' (LOM I, 19).

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since appearances are all we will ever encounter. 'In politics, more than anywhere else, we have no possibility of distinguishing between being and appearance.'<sup>99</sup> There is no escape from appearances. One can only escape appearance into another appearance. Because in Arendt's view being is appearing, being is contingent throughout. This implies a rejection of all necessary truths which have always been tied to the essence, that is, Being, of things and a commitment to the contingent nature of the human affairs.

The second metaphysical fallacy, solipsism, or radical subjectivism, concerns the illusory belief that the thinking self is more real, certain and true than anything else and the primary source and object of knowledge.<sup>100</sup> The most prominent and famous example is of course Descartes' *cogito*, i.e. consciousness conceived as a solipsistic substance and source of knowledge that is radically separate from the world, including others and the body. Arendt, however, held that the thinking self only exists as long as it thinks, and that the reality of the self depends to a large extent on our appearance in the public world in words and deeds and on the recognition and reactions of others to them.

The third metaphysical fallacy is the identification of truth and meaning.<sup>101</sup> According to Arendt, metaphysicians hold that thinking is directed towards truth. However, thinking is a quest for meaning instead of truth. Unlike the pursuit of knowledge, thinking does not aim at determining the truth, but at understanding meaning. This does not imply that thinking should disregard truth. Facts, scientific knowledge and experience are the sources of thinking's quest for meaning. The identification of truth and meaning is disastrous, since the properties of truth, which, according to Arendt, is always factual truth, differ vastly from those of meaning.<sup>102</sup> Truth, firstly, is given, while meaning emerges in the process of thinking and is not discovered in, but attributed to reality. Second, truth is unambiguous, immutable and compelling, while meaning is plural, variable and either convincing or not. Truth is unambiguous since it asserts what is the case. And something either is, or is not the case. Hence, it is immutable and compelling. Although reality is perpetually changing, new facts do not undo old ones. Meaning, on the contrary, is changeable and plural, since the interpretation of facts varies through time, and therefore does the meaning of these facts. Some interpretations will convince us, others will not.

The final fallacy is the internal warfare between thinking and common sense.<sup>103</sup> Since professional philosophers belong to the world, they partake in common sense. From the worldly perspective of common sense, thinking is a strange, useless activity that could

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<sup>99</sup> 'The social question', OR, 98.

<sup>100</sup> LOM I, §7. Arendt primarily has Descartes in mind.

<sup>101</sup> LOM I, §8.

<sup>102</sup> See §6 on factuality.

<sup>103</sup> LOM I, §10.

hardly be called an activity at all. While thinking, we seem indeed inactive. In order to defend himself against this skeptical voice, the professional thinker in his turn starts to oppose and fight common sense and the many (οἱ πολλοί) who are not used to think.<sup>104</sup>

### *Paradoxes*

Arendt's approach of the relationship and tension between belonging and withdrawal is but one example of a recurrent motif in her thought: the paradox. Arendt's thought contains many of such paradoxes, although she did not elaborate this figure explicitly.<sup>105</sup> This feature of her method has caused much confusion and misunderstandings in Arendt scholarship. Apart from the paradoxes of the life of the mind<sup>106</sup>, I will discuss the paradoxes of plurality<sup>107</sup> and the paradox of citizenship<sup>108</sup>, the paradoxes of distance and engagement<sup>109</sup>, and the paradox of worldliness and humanity<sup>110</sup>, in the following chapters. I use 'paradox' in its literary rather than its logical sense. As a trope, a paradox contains a juxtaposition of apparently incongruous or contradictory ideas, concepts or experiences that upon closer examination turn out to make sense. Derived from the Greek *παρά*, contrary to, and *δόξα*, opinion, paradoxes contain at first sight counterintuitive but nonetheless sensible or meaningful insights. Paradoxes, in other words, express false oppositions.

Typical for Arendt's phenomenological use of paradoxes is that it is concerned with real-life experiences instead of logical exercises. Arendt's paradoxes try to do justice to the many ambiguities, inconsistencies, and ambivalences that are characteristic of real-life

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<sup>104</sup> See chapter 4 on common sense.

<sup>105</sup> The many paradoxes she pays attention to include the Greek paradox of the futility and greatness of the intersubjective world of action ('The concept of history', BPF, 45-47); the typically modern paradox of power and violence (WiP, 76-77; PP, 150); the modern paradoxes of historical time (LOM II, 202-07); the paradoxes of human rights (OT, 'The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man'); the paradox of beginning and the foundation of political communities (LOM II, 210; 'The revolutionary tradition and its lost treasure', OR); the paradox of the politics of compassion and violence ('The social question', OR, 86-92); the Socratic paradoxes ('Some questions of moral philosophy', RJ, 82-83); and the paradox of reason (LOM II, 105).

<sup>106</sup> Taminioux mentions a lot of paradoxes arising among the mental activities themselves and derived from the fundamental paradox of belonging and withdrawal (1997, appendix: 'Time and the inner conflicts of the mind').

<sup>107</sup> See chapter 2 and Introduction to part II. The paradoxes of plurality comprise the paradox of difference and equality; the paradox of difference and commonality and its reverse, the paradox of isolation and fusion; and finally the paradox of communication and conflict (or intersubjectivity and individuality; agonism and associationism; being-together and solitude).

<sup>108</sup> See chapter 6. The paradox of citizenship is a paradox of revealing and concealing.

<sup>109</sup> See Conclusion.

<sup>110</sup> See Conclusion.

experience. More particularly it deals with various, often conflicting, experiences, that are nonetheless related. This is a relation like the two sides of a coin. The two sides refer to different conceptual aspects and their underlying experiences which are mutually interdependent or conditional. In other words, the paradox is Arendt's way to focus on and keep in view irreducible tensions in the experience and conceptual renderings of certain phenomena.<sup>111</sup> Hence, she takes issue with the philosophical and scientific tendency to solve paradoxes, by glossing over tensions and conflicts, either by turning them into contradictions, or by reconciling them. By exposing the paradoxical nature of certain phenomena, Arendt wants to draw attention to the tension between apparently contradictory experiences and concepts instead of solving or reconciling them. Her paradoxes illuminate the connection of different experiences, as, for instance, thinking and interaction in public space in the paradox of belonging and withdrawal, because human existence itself is intrinsically paradoxical.<sup>112</sup>

*Experiment: storytelling*

The experimental dimension of understanding is analytically distinguished from the destructive or critical.<sup>113</sup> It is strongly expressed in Arendt's narrative interpretation of political phenomena.<sup>114</sup> Storytelling is experimental because it always and necessarily transcends the given, facts or testimonials<sup>115</sup>, and turns them into a meaningful account, while remaining true to the facts. For Arendt, a story ties into the meanings implicit in our

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<sup>111</sup> Taminiiaux, 1997, 200.

<sup>112</sup> Taminiiaux, 1997, 200.

<sup>113</sup> The opposite of deconstruction or dismantling is not construction in Arendt's view; for construction means to impose something that is made up, fictitiously or ideologically, upon reality rather than have reality reveal its own meaning.

<sup>114</sup> The most explicit reflections on storytelling in Arendt's work occur in HC, §25; MDT, (essays on Lessing, Isak Dinesen en Walter Benjamin) and 'Preface', BPF. For secondary literature on the role of storytelling in Arendt's work, see Ricoeur, 1983; Canovan, 1992, Chapter 3, contains a section on storytelling as method; Disch, 1994, Chapter 1, 1-19, Chapter 4, 106-40; idem, 1997; Herzog, 2000, 2001, 2002; Luban, 1983; Vollrath, 1977, Ludz, 1996; Vasterling 2007a. To be sure, Arendt's work features different types of stories; or one should rather say: different though interconnected aspects of storytelling, namely existential-anthropological and methodological, with shifting emphasis. Most commentators, however, restrict themselves to giving an account of only one of these dimensions of narrativity. Usually they stress the existential dimension; Luban (1983) and Benhabib (1990) also discuss its methodological dimension. Sometimes Arendt focuses on the story of a single person's life, for instance in her 'autobiography' of Rahel Varnhagen, in the literary portraits of individuals like Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht in *Men in dark times* up to her biographical sketch of Adolph Eichmann in her report of his trial. This aspect of storytelling follows from her anthropological phenomenology which will be the topic of the next chapter (chapter 2).

<sup>115</sup> Hinchman and Hinchman, 1991, 463.

understanding of reality, rather than making up a fictitious storyline and imposing it upon reality.<sup>116</sup>

Why does storytelling suit the needs of a hermeneutic phenomenology of the political so well?<sup>117</sup> For Arendt, the role and meaning of storytelling is not merely illustrating political phenomena, but providing rich phenomenological descriptions which reveal their meaning bottom-up or inductively. 'No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism (...) can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story.'<sup>118</sup> She holds that stories fit political phenomena, since, first, they are capable of capturing their particularity, uniqueness, contingency and unpredictability. Unlike conventional methods and conceptual accounts in the humanities and social sciences, stories do not generalize phenomena, nor do they explain socio-historical processes, but reveal their meaning, that is, facilitate understanding. Unlike theories, stories defend no compelling claims of truth, but are oriented towards meaning, or perhaps more accurately, to meaningfulness. '[Arendt's] skeptical attitude towards historical patterns was complemented by her enthusiasm for storytelling.'<sup>119</sup> In her view, the social scientific or historiographic quest for explanation is a highly generalizing way of dealing with the human affairs that deprives phenomena of their unique and contingent occurrence. Storytelling, on the contrary, is a way, in Arendt's perspective perhaps even the only way, of preserving experiences and events in their uniqueness. Stories have the potential to bring out the meaningful pattern of actions, without reducing them to chains of causes and effects. Stories can do justice to the contingency, changeability and newness of events, while theories tend to reduce the new and unprecedented to the already known. Stories presuppose and demonstrate that experiences are contingent, but they simultaneously create some coherence, if only because a story has a beginning, an end, a plot and maybe even a 'moral'<sup>120</sup>. In *The origins of totalitarianism* Arendt is therefore not concerned with pointing out the causes for the emergence of totalitarianism, discovering a necessary continuity, nor even multiple continuities, between past and present. This would suggest that the way history has developed was inevitable. Rather, in Part I on anti-Semitism, and Part II on imperialism, Arendt demonstrates how particular elements that were present in European political and moral culture in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, contingently crystallized into the unexpected and

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<sup>116</sup> For the difference between fiction and storytelling, see Vasterling, 2002.

<sup>117</sup> On the relation between storytelling and hermeneutics, see: Vollrath, 1977, 167; Ludz, 1996 and Vasterling 2007c.

<sup>118</sup> MDT, 21-22.

<sup>119</sup> Canovan, 1992, 95.

<sup>120</sup> Canovan, 1992, 97-98.

new phenomenon of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. This crystallization can only be ascertained retrospectively, with hindsight.

Though based on knowledge of the facts, storytelling does not reveal the truth, but the meaning of what it relates. Hence, its validity is never of an objective but, instead, of an exemplary nature. A story is successful when it demonstrates or reveals meaning in a non-generalizing, exemplary way. Theories, on the other hand, usually subsume the particular under generalizing concepts.<sup>121</sup> 'It was part of Arendt's method of writing to find exemplary cases (...) and use them to draw us away from traditional concepts which block us from seeing new experiences clearly (from thinking what we are doing).'<sup>122</sup> Arendt explained the idea of exemplary validity in a letter to Karl Jaspers. In this letter, she explicated the conception of her biography of Rahel Varnhagen:

Eine Objektivation in bestimmten Sinne liegt wirklich vor: aber nicht ein Objektivation der jüdischen Existenz (etwa als Gestalt), sondern eines geschichtlichen Lebenszusammenhanges, von dem ich allerdings glaube, daß mit ihm etwas gemeint sein kann (aber keine objektive Idee oder etwas Ähnliches). Es scheint, als seien bestimmte Personen in ihrem eigenen Leben (und nur in diesem, nicht etwa als Personen!) derart exponiert, daß sie gleichsam Knotenpunkte und konkrete Objektivationen 'des' Lebens werden. (...) Was dieses alles eigentlich ist: Schicksal, Exponiertheit, es ist mit dem Leben etwas gemeint - kann ich nicht (und merke es im Schreiben) in abstracto sagen, sondern höchstens vielleicht exemplifizierend aufweisen. Gerade deshalb will ich auch eine Biographie schreiben.<sup>123</sup>

Indeed, Arendt was fond of writing biographical profiles and frequently did so. Like events, persons are able to illuminate reality. In the introduction to her volume of biographical essays on Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Jaspers, among others, *Men in dark times*, she writes for example:

That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth - this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn. Eyes so used to darkness as ours will hardly be able to tell whether their light was the light of a candle or that of a blazing sun.

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<sup>121</sup> On exemplary validity and truth, see LOM I, 169; 'Truth and politics', BPF, 247-48.

<sup>122</sup> Jacobitti, 1991a, 286-87.

<sup>123</sup> Letter of March 24, 1930; IW, 212-13.

But such objective evaluation seems to me a matter of secondary importance which can be safely left to posterity.<sup>124</sup>

To say that stories themselves constitute spaces of appearance is to assert their political relevance, as well as their existential role and meaning. By telling stories, the meaningfulness of events discloses itself, as captured in the metaphor of 'illumination'.<sup>125</sup> This is another way of saying that we start to understand them. And understanding may initiate a process of reconciliation with past events<sup>126</sup> and of reorientation.<sup>127</sup> This is particularly relevant, Arendt thought, in the face of a fragmented past and with respect to giving an account of dark times, primarily the event of totalitarianism, which has radically broken 'the thread of tradition'<sup>128</sup> and hence cannot be understood and judged with categories derived from the same tradition. 'Under these conditions one required a story that would once again reorient the mind in its aimless wanderings. For only such a reorientation could reclaim the past so as to build the future.'<sup>129</sup> Arendt held the conviction that 'stories had the capacity to save the world.'<sup>130</sup>

#### **4. The scholar-as-spectator: situated and critical impartiality**

Arendt's method of storytelling challenges the conventional scholarly ideal of objectivity. This ideal implies that the scholar is a disengaged, external observer who remains external to the subject matter she studies while applying a method that is equally detached from this subject matter. In other words, she takes an external, third-person perspective. In its ultimate and unreflected consequence, this position constitutes the 'Archimedean point', as Arendt calls it, an abstract or (quasi-)universalistic point of view, or a 'point of view that claims to transcend all particular points of view'<sup>131</sup>. This objective point of view usually presupposes an explainable and predictable reality governed by laws with universal validity.

Arendt on the contrary holds that human worldly reality is situated, contingent and changing in ways that we can never predict fully. In her view, the scholar takes the position

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<sup>124</sup> MDT, ix-x.

<sup>125</sup> MDT, ix.

<sup>126</sup> Reconciliation 'to what we do and what we suffer' (UP, 309); 'with things as they really are'; 'with what irrevocably happened' and 'with what unavoidably exists' (UP, 322).

<sup>127</sup> Arendt on the relation between storytelling and reconciliation or redemption: BPF, 45; UP, 307-09, 321-22. Cf. Herzog, 2001, 188-90; Vollrath, 1977; Luban, 1983; Benhabib, 1990.

<sup>128</sup> LOM I, 212; UP, 310-11, 321.

<sup>129</sup> Benhabib, 1990, in particular 180.

<sup>130</sup> Herzog, 2000, 3.

<sup>131</sup> Young, 1997, 358.

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of the spectator. This implies that the scholar is both non-involved in the sense that she is not participating in the worldly reality she observes, because she takes a distance from the topic she is investigating; and more or less engaged in so far as she observes worldly phenomena that have drawn her attention. Because of this engagement, the Arendtian spectator is a situated spectator. The Arendtian scholar takes the position of the engaged spectator<sup>132</sup> in relation to his topic of investigation, for the position of the disengaged observer precludes access to meaning, which is the very aim of hermeneutic phenomenology.<sup>133</sup> As a worldly spectator, the Arendtian scholar is always already intimately familiar with the particular topic of her research through daily experience. In accordance with the already mentioned scholarly ethos of commitment to events, the spectator lets herself be addressed. She thus takes a second-person perspective in order to get access to the meaning of phenomena. There is an element of taste, of being immediately affected by phenomena and discriminating between what appeals and what does not in the spectator's response.<sup>134</sup> A nice example is Kant's enthusiasm about the French Revolution and the shock, in many spectators worldwide, of 9/11. Arendt's scholar-as-engaged-and-situated-spectator is oriented toward the inherent meaningfulness of human action and thus replaces the objectification to which the scholar-as-disengaged-observer tends. From Arendt's phenomenological perspective, the task of the scholar-as-spectator is to 'describe faithfully' rather than 'reflect objectively' political phenomena<sup>135</sup>, i.e. events, facts and incidents as they appear to the spectator's eyes and the senses and show or manifest themselves in their very facticity, particularity and contingency. We will see that such a faithful and accurate description of reality demands that the scholar carefully distinguishes between different phenomena in order to do justice to their phenomenal particularity.<sup>136</sup> In Arendt, these distinctions are not infrequently expressed in the form of paradoxes. The spectator should be open towards the topic he or she investigates and respond in style. As a hermeneuticist, Arendt holds that understanding starts with an appeal the phenomena make on us, eliciting a response.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, she adds an explicitly normative, i.e. political, dimension<sup>138</sup> which she describes as the issue of style<sup>139</sup>. In her view, the phenomenologist's style should be adjusted to the phenomenon

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<sup>132</sup> Or witness, Herzog, 2002, 87.

<sup>133</sup> Krüger, 2007, 621-22, makes the similar distinction between *Teilnahme*, participation, vs. *Beobachtung*, observation.

<sup>134</sup> On the role of taste in understanding and judging, see §2 above.

<sup>135</sup> Herzog, 2002, 83, 86.

<sup>136</sup> See §6, on the various misunderstandings Arendt's emphasis on distinctions has occasioned.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode*, Vasterling, 2003.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. Vollrath, 1977.

<sup>139</sup> 'A reply', EU, 404.

under consideration itself.<sup>140</sup> Sometimes, a high degree of engagement is appropriate; but if required, a more distanced style should be adopted. Arendt describes this as the question of 'adequacy and response'. So the scholar's style is a matter of 'response-ability', responsibility in bringing accounts - stories - in the public sphere.<sup>141</sup> 'If I write in the same 'objective' manner about the Elizabethan age and the twentieth century, it may well be that my dealing with both periods is inadequate because I have renounced the human faculty to respond to either', Arendt writes.<sup>142</sup> She defends the indignation which permeates her investigations of totalitarianism on this ground, against the traditional requirement of the objectivist, disengaged historian to write 'without anger and eagerness' (*sine ira et studio*); the motto coined by the Roman historian Tacitus (60-120)<sup>143</sup>:

[T]o me this was a methodological necessity closely connected with my particular subject matter. (...) If I describe [excessive poverty, for example] without permitting my indignation to interfere, I have lifted this particular phenomenon out of its context in human society and have thereby robbed it of part of its nature, deprived of one of its important inherent qualities. For to arouse indignation is one of the qualities of excessive poverty insofar as poverty occurs among human beings.<sup>144</sup>

In fact, she is prescribing a professional ethos of the scholar. Setting aside moral indignation would, at least in cases as extreme as the camps, come down to moral complicity. 'To describe the concentration camps *sine ira* is not to be 'objective', but to condone them.'<sup>145</sup> This means choosing a style that fits, is appropriate, which sometimes means expressing explicit value judgments on one's topic of investigation. Otherwise you will not get at what is most important to Arendt as a hermeneutic phenomenologist: the

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<sup>140</sup> Herzog, 2002, 86.

<sup>141</sup> Herzog, 2002, 87.

<sup>142</sup> 'A reply', EU, 404.

<sup>143</sup> The first paragraph of the introduction of his *Annals* reads 'Rome at the beginning was ruled by kings. Freedom and the consulship were established by Lucius Brutus. Dictatorships were held for a temporary crisis. The power of the decemvirs did not last beyond two years, nor was the consular jurisdiction of the military tribunes of long duration. The despotisms of Cinna and Sulla were brief; the rule of Pompeius and of Crassus soon yielded before Caesar; the arms of Lepidus and Antonius before Augustus; who, when the world was wearied by civil strife, subjected it to empire under the title of "Prince." But the successes and reverses of the old Roman people have been recorded by famous historians; and fine intellects were not wanting to describe the times of Augustus, till growing sycophancy scared them away. The histories of Tiberius, Caius, Claudius, and Nero, while they were in power, were falsified through terror, and after their death were written under the irritation of a recent hatred. Hence my purpose is to relate a few facts about Augustus (...), without either bitterness or partiality [*sine ira et studio*], from any motives to which I am far removed.' (Tacitus (1921 [109 BC])).

<sup>144</sup> 'A reply', EU, 403.

<sup>145</sup> 'A reply', EU, 404.

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meaning and significance of the phenomenon for present-day human beings. This is because humans are situated beings. Objectivity in the traditional sense often implies the concealment of the evaluative perspective that almost always guides our preliminary understanding.

This is anything but a call for a subjective, i.e. involved, first-person, point of view. Arendt rejects subjectivity as much as objectivity in favor of an intersubjective perspective. The Arendtian scholar is not a third-person disengaged observer, but neither, for that matter, is she a first-person participant or actor.<sup>146</sup> She agrees with Greek historian Thucydides (460-400 BC) that ‘keeping oneself aloof and quite consciously so, from involvement with events themselves’ is the proper attitude or scholarly ethos to adopt.<sup>147</sup> Like Tacitus on the history of Rome and Homer on the Trojan War, Thucydides reconstructed the Peloponnesian War and took in account the perspectives of the various engaged parties and left it to the reader to interpret the conflicts he described and so to judge for herself.<sup>148</sup> No judgment is possible without distancing. Distancing should be carefully distinguished from the withdrawal of the external observer, though.<sup>149</sup> Whereas the engagement of the spectator implies that she is addressed and affected by the immediate presence and the affects phenomena provoke, she should subsequently distance herself from these immediate affects and private interests, gain or fame, connected to them, which are typical for the perspective of the actor.

In Arendt’s understanding of the hermeneutic circle, understanding and judgment not only demand imagination in order to leave behind the merely subjective and in order to enlarge one’s mentality, but also critical reflection in order to ‘meet the phenomenon, so to speak, head-on, without any pre-conceived system’, because theoretical constructions and prejudices obstruct access and attention to the phenomena as unique and novel occurrences.<sup>150</sup> This implies a readiness ‘to say what is’<sup>151</sup> or to ‘try to tell and to understand

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<sup>146</sup> As is defended, among others, in some strong versions of feminist, postcolonial and post-Marxist standpoint thinking.

<sup>147</sup> Arendt, 1968, ‘The Archimedian Point’, 2, archive-number 031394. Arendt adds that ‘[Thucydides] wrote his history [*The history of the Peloponnesian War*] during the twenty years of his exile from Athens and he himself says that this gave him an advantageous position for his enterprise.’ (2).

<sup>148</sup> Lisa Disch has suggested that Arendt tried to do for totalitarianism what Thucydides did for the Peloponnesian Wars. Disch, 1994, 127-30.

<sup>149</sup> ‘The Archimedian point’, 2.

<sup>150</sup> Arendt, 1973, ‘Remarks of Professor Hannah Arendt’, 8-9, archive numbers 011835-01183613.

<sup>151</sup> *Legein ta eonta* (Herodotus), as quoted in ‘The concept of history’, BPF, 64. In book I (Clio) of his *Histories*, Herodotus writes: ‘ὡς ὧν Περσέων μετεξέτεροι λέγουσι, οἱ μὴ βουλόμενοι σεμνοῦν τὰ περὶ Κῦρον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἔοντα λέγειν λόγον, κατὰ ταῦτα γράψω, ἐπιστάμενος περὶ Κύρου καὶ τριφασίας ἄλλας λόγων ὁδοῦς φῆναι.’ (‘Following then the report of some of the Persians - those I mean who do not desire to glorify the

what had happened<sup>152</sup>. This means to let political phenomena, so to say, speak for themselves as much as possible, to account for them in their own terms or bring them to an articulation of their own meaning.<sup>153</sup> Arendt understood the phenomenological motto *Zu den Sachen selbst!* as the demand to open oneself up to the newness of events through relinquishing as much as possible one's pre-conceived categories.

Based on the above, the validity of judgment in Arendt can be explained in terms of what she calls 'impartiality'.<sup>154</sup> More particularly, this impartiality could be described as 'situated impartiality'<sup>155</sup>, representativeness<sup>156</sup> and critical impartiality. This validity is the result of the contextually dependent proportion between the representative and critical moments of understanding and judging.<sup>157</sup> The spectator's judgment is neither universal or detached, like the disengaged observer's perspective, but appeals to imagination, that is, to representative thinking, enlarged mentality or *erweiterte Denkungsart*. This implies one 'goes visiting'<sup>158</sup>, that is, represents in imagination for oneself, the possible views on a particular situation from as many others as possible, and subsequently critically reviews them.<sup>159</sup> Iris Marion Young has justly noticed that this does not mean 'taking the standpoint of all the others', for this would 'presume the possibility of and identification amongst us all'. This assumption 'tends to collapse the difference between subjects', i.e. 'the plurality of perspectives that Arendt found constitutive of publicity.'<sup>160</sup> Moreover, 'taking the standpoint of all others' would neglect the critical moment of reflection upon these perspectives inherent in Arendt's understanding of impartiality. So Arendtian impartiality does not admonition detachment of perspectives<sup>161</sup> or putting ourselves in the position of any other person, in abstraction from the context and situation. This would, in fact imply a return to the Archimedian conception of objectivity as abstraction from all particular

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history of Cyrus but to speak that which is in fact true - according to their report, I say, I shall write; but I could set forth also the other forms of the story in three several ways.' (Herodotus, 1890, 95).

<sup>152</sup> OT, xxiii.

<sup>153</sup> Burke, 1997, 29-31; Schnell, 1995, 241.

<sup>154</sup> LKPP, 72.

<sup>155</sup> Disch, 1994, 158, 162-63; idem, 1993. Though I think this is a useful term, I would stress the hermeneutic-phenomenological background that Disch does not pay attention to. The context within which Disch discusses this topic is the debate between modernists and postmodernists. In my view, she assimilates Arendt's challenge of the Archimedian ideal of objectivity too much to late twentieth century debates.

<sup>156</sup> Vasterling, 2007b.

<sup>157</sup> For an account of the contextually dependent relation between the representative and critical moments of understanding and judging, see Vasterling, 2007b.

<sup>158</sup> LKPP, 43.

<sup>159</sup> On 'enlarged mentality' also see LOM I. Cf. Herzog, 2002, 85.

<sup>160</sup> Young, 1997, 359.

<sup>161</sup> Cf. Villa, 1992, 296: impartiality is non-objective and is concerned with communicability

situations and involvements<sup>162</sup> and hence a suppression of plurality. Also, impartiality is not dependent upon imagination alone, but also upon critical reflection. Note that the hermeneutic process has come full circle here, since we are now able to make visible and articulate the meaning of the original phenomenon we started to study.

Like postmodernists, Arendt questions the scientific ideal of objectivity and impartiality. But unlike them, this does not lead her to a wholesale or radical relativist rejection of this ideal, but to the development of an alternative normative criterion for sound political understanding and judgment.

## 5. Challenging scientism and metaphysics

In the preceding sections, I have already touched upon Arendt's criticism of conventional methods in the empirical social sciences and the humanities several times. In this section, I want to discuss this criticism somewhat more systematically and in detail.

The topics Arendt is interested in are political phenomena, such as events, incidents and facts which make up the world of appearances. As a phenomenologist, Arendt is interested in the typical or exemplary experiences of the political: new events and facts that emerge as a consequence of human actions and words. She approaches them in a typically hermeneutic fashion, which means she is oriented towards the interpretation of the meaning of phenomena. As such, her approach is opposed to the pursuit of the discovery of causes or motives, patterns, processes, forces, laws or trends, in short, regularities and necessities, in the realm of the human affairs.<sup>163</sup> Such regularities, Arendt held, are mostly made, i.e. imposed upon events through induction from observed data. Roughly two methods stand out. Scholars in the humanities, i.e. in historiography or philosophy, tend to derive regularities through conceptual generalization and logical argumentation: 'deducing, inducing and drawing conclusions', whilst obeying the principles of non-contradiction and inner consistency.<sup>164</sup> Social scientists on the other hand often apply quantitative methodological tools to measure and process data, such as statistical analysis or, more recently, computer modeling. In both domains of the sciences, despite numerous deconstructions of absolute objectivity in contemporary philosophy, many scholars still

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<sup>162</sup> As the original Kantian notion of *erweiterte Denkungsart* implies. Arendt borrows the concept of *erweiterte Denkungsart* from Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, but in fact transforms and radicalizes it. For Kant, *erweiterte Denkungsart* refers to an abstracted, universalized position; for Arendt, on the contrary, it refers to the particular perspectives of particular people.

<sup>163</sup> 'The concept of history', BPF, 60-65.

<sup>164</sup> Arendt in particular abhorred Hobbes' geometrical method of 'reckoning of consequences'. See chapter 3.

implicitly and unwittingly appear to adhere to the Archimedian ideal of the scholar as an external observer vis-à-vis her object of investigation in order to accomplish objectivity.

In Arendt's view, both methods, if used uncritically and one-sidedly, are deficient ways of approaching the human affairs. They do not do justice to the unique occurrence of phenomena by forcing them in the mold of either a cause-and-effect model (reductionism) or of patterns and laws which determine the course of human history and from which predictions about the future can be derived (determinism). Such generalizations and categorizations, Arendt argues, obliterate that which makes any phenomenon concrete and unique, in other words, its inherent meaning, significance or meaningfulness.<sup>165</sup> Illuminative is her criticism of causal explanation in historiography. Causality, she writes, 'is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences.'<sup>166</sup> Contrary to what Arendt suggests, causal explanation and quantitative measures may be relevant and appropriate methods in the historical sciences, for example in the investigation of socio-economic processes. Problems occur, however, when these methods are the only ones used, or when they are applied one-sidedly and uncritically.

Not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past 'causes' which we may assign to it (...); this past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past, it can never be deduced from it.<sup>167</sup>

She concludes: 'Whoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality actually denies the subject matter of his own science', i.e. the event.<sup>168</sup> Events are irrevocable and unique, hence rare occurrences. Likewise, the social scientist conducting only statistical analysis wipes out the event. Since the validity of statistical analysis depends on the size of the measured population and on the length of the measured period - the larger the numbers and the longer the periods, the more valid the outcome will be - that which is rare is either filtered out as a deviation from the bulk or is lost in the statistical average. As a consequence, Arendt contends, statistical analysis 'signifies nothing less than the willful obliteration of th[e] very subject matter [of the political and historical sciences], and it is a hopeless enterprise to search for the meaning in politics or significance in history when

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<sup>165</sup> UP, 319-20. For Arendt's criticism of generalization, see HC, 300; 'The concept of history', BPF, 60-65; 'On violence', CR, 109-10.

<sup>166</sup> UP, 319.

<sup>167</sup> On 'processes' and 'patterns', see UP, 319-20. Cf. BPF, 64-65 81; On 'historical trends', see OT, 1958, 482.

<sup>168</sup> UP, 319.

everything that is not everyday behaviour or automatic trends has been ruled out as immaterial.<sup>169</sup>

Examples of reductionist and determinist scholarship include, within the social sciences, social Darwinism (which reduces human behavior to evolutionary causes), but also more contemporary and generally accepted methods in empirical psychological research which attempt to discover psychological motives for action and the laws governing human behavior. Within sociology, large-scale quantitative surveys of human actions are common.<sup>170</sup> The main example of determinism in the humanities Arendt had in mind is Hegel's dialectical conception of history and Marxist philosophy of history, which strives to find the historical laws of collective human behavior in the light of the theory of historical materialism. Marx made predictions based on these dialectical laws of class struggle: the logical necessity of the future proletarian revolution and the emergence of the classless communist society.<sup>171</sup> Hegel's 'ruse of reason' (*List der Vernunft*) is another case in point. In his view, history unfolds inevitably and according to unwavering dialectical laws, in the direction of its final aim: the self-realization of Spirit (*Geist*). This takes place behind the backs of its agents, who often do not notice the true course of history in the apparent disorder and multiplicity of events.

In Arendt's view, these methodological commitments may lead to ideological constructions. In the empirical social sciences these constructions comprise scientific or positivist approaches, for example behaviorism or some contemporary forms of social Darwinism<sup>172</sup>; in the humanities metaphysical approaches, such as the ones reflected in the metaphysical prejudices and the metaphysical fallacies<sup>173</sup>. Both scientism and metaphysics are methodological constructions which obscure reality, because they impose a theoretical construction on human reality. Arendt more generally defines ideology as '-isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise.'<sup>174</sup> Also, ideologies claim complete internal consistency. Such consistency, Arendt says, 'exists nowhere in the realm of reality'.<sup>175</sup> The working principle of any ideology is the 'self-coercive force of logical deduction', since, as Arendt puts it, ideologies confine people to 'the strait jacket of logic with which man can force himself

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<sup>169</sup> HC, 42-43.

<sup>170</sup> Additionally, Arendt, anticipating on Foucault's work, acknowledged the compulsion towards normalization the social sciences exert, in HC and 'On violence', CR.

<sup>171</sup> For Arendt's methodological critique of Marx, see Canovan, 1992, 94-95.

<sup>172</sup> Luban, 1983, 216; Luban, however speaks of science as such; I think positivism or scientism is more adequate, since not all forms of science are scientific.

<sup>173</sup> Vollrath, 1979a, 27; cf. 29, 35-36.

<sup>174</sup> OT, 468.

<sup>175</sup> OT, 471.

almost as violently as he is forced by some outside power.<sup>176</sup> Arendt is worried that by creating consistent systems substituting for reality, ideologies effectively eliminate attention and commitment to the phenomena themselves, as they appear. By looking for similarities between as many different cases as possible in order to formulate general laws, historians are susceptible to what Benhabib has called 'the pitfall of analogical thinking'<sup>177</sup>. By ruling out the unprecedented and unfamiliar, they tend to rob events and facts of their uniqueness, contingency and newness. As such, they affect our sense of the real. There are different degrees to this: from the a-historical perspective generated by scientific and metaphysical generalization; through disdain to factuality,<sup>178</sup> due to the simultaneous contingency and immutability of facts<sup>179</sup>; up to a complete blindness to reality in totalitarian regimes when ideology has entirely substituted for reality and has reduced the plurality of human perspectives on the world to one: the ideological system which explains everything.

Apart from methodological problems, the ideologies of scientism and metaphysics also pose political problems. The scientific and metaphysical habit to orient oneself to necessary, instead of contingent, truths and laws and to already existing and to be expected patterns and regularities, suggest that 'what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun' (Ecclesiastes 1: 9-14) or in Lucretius' words, *eadem sunt omnia semper*.<sup>180</sup> To ignore the new means to relinquish the hope that the status quo may change. 'Within the framework of preconceived categories the crudest of which is causality, events in the sense of something irrevocable never can happen; history without events becomes the dead monotony of sameness, unfolded in time.'<sup>181</sup> In turn, the degradation of our susceptibility or sensibility to the new may lead to normalization; turning the unknown, absurd, unacceptable and horrible into something commonplace, ordinary, customary, familiar; up to neutralization and ruling out resistance. '[D]enying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by (...) analogous generalities' ensures that 'the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt.'<sup>182</sup> Finally, this normalization leads to world alienation, to the severing of ties binding concepts to reality and experience altogether.

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<sup>176</sup> OT, 470.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. Benhabib, 1990, 184.

<sup>178</sup> UP, 317.

<sup>179</sup> See §3 on the contingency and immutability of facts.

<sup>180</sup> UP, 320.

<sup>181</sup> UP, 320.

<sup>182</sup> OT, xiv.

## 6. Misunderstandings: experience, facts and distinctions

Arendt's work has raised a number of persistent and recurring objections and has caused much confusion. Her appeal to experience and her appreciation of facts, some say, are crudely empiricist or even positivist mistakes. Additionally, the salience of distinctions in her work is often seen as a sign of a rigid essentialism. The distinctions between the private and the public, on the one hand, the social and the political, on the other hand, in particular are found offensive. In this section I will argue that these three objections are in my view actually misunderstandings, which can be repaired by referring to the frequently poorly understood hermeneutic-phenomenological context of Arendt's work. Typical of Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology is her appeal to experience, fact and the judging activity of making distinctions. Moreover, I would claim, Arendt's adherence to experience, facts and concise distinctions is informed by sensible considerations of political responsibility. Through repairing these common misunderstanding, I hope to rescue the value of experience, of factuality and of making distinctions for critically and responsibly studying the political.

### *Experience*

As argued, for Arendt, understanding the meaning of political phenomena, facts and events presupposes a phenomenological analysis of our lived experiences. Lived experience refers to how we, human beings, live our lives, are involved in projects and interact with each other. Far removed from the sense data of empiricists, lived experience is inherently meaningful. There would be no lived experience if it were not meaningful. Because things make sense to us, we are able to experience them, even to have experiences at all. Experience is constituted by an implicit, pre-reflective understanding of phenomena, which comes about through our practical dealings with them. However, the notion of experience and the appeal to experience in theoretical debates, have fallen in disrepute since the 1970s under the influence of postmodernism. Postmodernists criticize phenomenologists for applying a strong or naively empiricist or scientific conception of experience. Empiricism here refers to the basic epistemological assumption that all knowledge is grounded in experience, while experience is understood as perception or sense data. A strong empiricist conception holds that experience is a pure source of knowledge which mirrors reality 'out there', independent of language and interpretation, to which we can have immediate access. Arendt is not an empiricist but on the contrary entertains a hermeneutic-phenomenological notion of experience.<sup>183</sup> This means, first, that for Arendt and other hermeneutic-

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<sup>183</sup> In the following, I will lean heavily on Stoller, 2005.

phenomenologists, experience of phenomena always already contains an implicit understanding of their meaning. We are always already somehow familiar with the things we study. Experience does not, as empiricists have it, contain mere sense data, i.e. sensory stimuli devoid of meaning. We are never merely passive receivers of sense data, but always also actively taking part in the constitution of their meaning. The meaning of a phenomenon is always its meaning for us.<sup>184</sup> We always experience something as something, for example as a political, private or social phenomenon (the 'as-structure' of understanding).

Second, unlike strong empiricists, Arendt asserts that experience requires interpretation. Although experiences are always already meaningful to us, this does not imply that we start with an explicit understanding of their meaning. A hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis of lived experience and the implicit understandings contained in it, requires a critical reflective appropriation of their meaning. As explicated above, attaining explicit understanding and valid judgments, according to the criterion of situated impartiality, demands quite a lot of interpretative work on the part of the scholar.

Third, and finally, strong empiricists hold that experience expresses one true relation to the world, for the subject's experience mirrors and directly corresponds to the objective world 'out there'. Arendt, on the contrary, emphasizes the relational and perspectival nature of lived experience. Her phenomenological method takes into account the way phenomena appear to us. This puts the plural perspectives of the perceivers or spectators central stage. As a consequence, it rejects the dualism of a perceiver and the object he or she studies that empiricism presupposes. Also, for Arendt, plurality implies that there is not, nor should there be, a single true relation to reality, but many; potentially as many as the number of individuals involved.

Arendt's criticism of scientism and metaphysics may in many ways be regarded as an anticipation of postmodernism. Postmodernists, however, tend to be so radical in their criticism of empiricism that they disqualify experience altogether and thus lose an important and interesting methodological approach of, in this case, the political field.

### *Factuality*

Arendt's hermeneutic-phenomenological explication of experience avoids two equally unfruitful intellectual positions regarding experience: strong empiricism and postmodernist skepticism. By extension, Arendt rescues the importance of the factuality - for facts are indeed the political concretization of phenomena - from, on the one hand, the strong or naive empiricist assumption that facts are just given; and, on the other hand, the relativist

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<sup>184</sup> Cf. Vasterling, 2003, 154-55.

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postmodernist assumption that facts are merely constructions. For Arendt, facts are neither given nor constructed, but they are the effect of human actions. Besides postmodernist skepticism and scientism, a third position with respect to factuality is also relevant here: the metaphysical tendency to ignore the contingency of facts - factual truths - in favor of necessary truths.

Postmodernists rightly stress that facts are selected and interpreted. This, by itself, does not require the disqualification of the notion of fact altogether, as some postmodernists do. First, because non-scientistic, phenomenological conceptualizations of factuality, which account for their invariably interpreted nature, are possible and indeed do exist in Arendt's work. And second, by renouncing the notion of fact altogether, one runs the risk of losing normatively, i.e. politically, significant criteria, such as contained in the distinction between fact and lie, on the one hand, and fact and fiction, on the other. Getting to know and being true to the facts means informing oneself of the basic givens of actual events or concrete states of affairs as they have occurred, such as: who attacked whom and when?<sup>185</sup> Such primary facts cannot simply be denied, ignored, disdained or altered without committing either a lie, or engaging in absurdity, non-sense, fiction or myth. Whoever asserts that Belgium invaded Germany in 1914, for instance, is lying, i.e. violating the facts.<sup>186</sup> Of course facts lend themselves to different interpretations - something strong empiricists tend to overlook. Interpretation starts with our selection of relevant facts, followed by plural and often conflicting interpretations. The significance of facts in the political sphere rests in their capacity to lend the human affairs relative stability and durability, because they constitute a common reference point and thus enable the sharing of the world. This especially occurs between conflicting parties, for it is with respect to the same facts that conflicting parties typically disagree. Hence, facts constitute the typical point of reference and subject matter of public deliberation.

Although facts are irrevocable and immutable once they have occurred, this occurrence is at the same time also thoroughly contingent. Facts could not have happened or have happened otherwise. This is something metaphysical thought, for example Hegel's dialectics which is geared to necessities in history, cannot accept and tries to eliminate. Facts 'carry no inherent truth within themselves, no necessity to be as they are. Factual truths are never compellingly true.'<sup>187</sup> It is, for example, an undeniable fact that in 2009 the first black American president in history was elected. However, it was in no way necessary that this happened; it could as well not have occurred at this moment, or even never at all. It is exactly for this reason, according to Arendt, that it is so easy and tempting to distort

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<sup>185</sup> In this section, I rely heavily on Vasterling, 2011b and on Vollrath, 1979b.

<sup>186</sup> Arendt's own example.

<sup>187</sup> 'Lying in politics', CR, 6.

the facts, to manipulate them for purposes of propaganda or simply withhold them to others. That a particular fact happened the way it happened is the only thing we can establish. That is compellingly and necessarily true; not what it is that happened. For this reason, facts are simultaneously hard and fragile. Facts are often unpredictable before they happen. They typically do not present themselves in a consistent, orderly fashion or structured according to a particular pattern. The meaning of a fact is usually not apparent on first sight. Consequentially, facts require interpretation. Knowing the facts may not be a sufficient, but it is a necessary condition for conducting good research, Arendt maintained.<sup>188</sup> She particularly warns for the danger that blindness to facts may lead to a collective escape from reality. One of the examples she elaborates concerns the so-called Pentagon papers. These revealed the 'organized mendacity' of the American government in dealing with the war in Vietnam, that had brought about a 'defactualized world', like an 'Alice-in-Wonderland atmosphere'<sup>189</sup>. 'What caused the disastrous defeat of American policies and armed intervention was (...) the willful, deliberate disregard of all facts, historical, political, geographical, for more than twenty-five years', reads the harsh conclusion she draws.<sup>190</sup>

### *Discriminating and distinctions*

At a conference in November 1972 on Arendt's work at the University of Toronto, Mary McCarthy remarked in the presence of Arendt herself:

This space that Hannah Arendt creates in her work and which one can walk into with the great sense of walking through an arch into a liberated area and a great part of it is occupied by definitions. Very close to the roots of Hannah Arendt's thinking is *distinguo*: 'I distinguish this from that. I distinguish labor from work. I distinguish fame from reputation.' And so on. This is actually a medieval habit of thought. (...) This habit of distinguishing is not popular in the modern world, where there is a kind of verbal blur surrounding most discourse. And if Hannah Arendt arouses hostility, one reason is because the possibility of making distinctions is not available to the ordinary reader. But to go back to the distinctions themselves - I would say that each one within this liberated area, within this free space - each distinction was like a little house. And, let us say, fame is living in its little house with its architecture, and reputation is living in another. So that all this space created by her is actually furnished.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> See 'Truth and politics', BPF; 'Lying in politics', CR and 'Terror and ideology', OT.

<sup>189</sup> 'Lying in politics', 20-21.

<sup>190</sup> 'Lying in Politics', 32. Cf. OT, viii; MDT, 20; UP, 317.

<sup>191</sup> Arendt, 'On Arendt', 1979, 337.

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Arendt responded as follows:

It is perfectly true what you say about distinctions. I always start anything - I don't like to know too well what I am doing - I always start anything by saying, 'A and B are not the same'. And this, of course, comes right out of Aristotle. And for you, it comes out of Aquinas, who also did the same.<sup>192</sup>

Discriminations, indeed, are an important feature of Arendt's phenomenological analyses. Understanding and judging essentially consist in discriminating: 'Dies ist so und nicht anders.'<sup>193</sup> They bring out the specificity of distinct phenomena. The capacity to discriminate is also closely connected to the capacity to recognize the facts that I described previously. Part of the phenomenological approach of analyzing and understanding phenomena consists in a focus on details and particularities. Such a careful analysis requires discrimination, instead of generalization.

Her phenomenological sensibility to the particular, the unique and the unprecedented, leads Arendt to argue that the essence of an event or state of affairs consist in its 'phenomenal difference', i.e. in those qualities which distinguish it from other events or states of affairs.<sup>194</sup> This belief is grounded in a firm anti-reductionism. Comparing and pointing out similarities between phenomena, Arendt held, may be instructive, but can never justify the reduction of one phenomenon to another. For this reason, she accentuates the 'distinct quality of what was actually happening' rather than the 'essential sameness' of different events.<sup>195</sup> These phenomenal differences refer to differences of factuality.<sup>196</sup> Discrimination is what it takes to describe as precisely and meticulously as possible a particular phenomenon. It is essential for Arendt as a hermeneutical phenomenologist of the political to be loyal to how and as what things themselves (*die Sachen selbst*) appear and show themselves. Phenomena, strictly speaking, are never the same. Strict identity does not exist or occur in nature, nor in history, because nature and history are dynamic and contingent. Arendt's discriminating is meant as the exact opposite of generalizing. We should be very careful to generalize with respect to the human affairs, both past and present. 'My chief quarrel with the present state of the historical and political sciences is their growing incapacity for making distinctions,' Arendt writes.

Terms like nationalism, imperialism, totalitarianism, etc., are used indiscriminately for all kinds of political phenomena (...) and none of them is any longer understood with its particular historical background. The result is a generalization in which the words

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<sup>192</sup> Arendt, 'On Arendt', 1979, 338.

<sup>193</sup> Vollrath, 1979b, 101.

<sup>194</sup> 'A reply', EU, 405.

<sup>195</sup> 'A reply', EU, 404-05.

<sup>196</sup> Vollrath, 1977, 173-74.

themselves lose all meaning. (...) This kind of confusion - where everything distinct disappears and everything that is new and shocking is (not explained but) explained away through drawing some analogies or reducing it to a previously known chain of causes and influences - seems to me to be the hallmark of the modern historical and political sciences.<sup>197</sup>

By making distinctions, Arendt opposes certain trends within the social sciences, most notably quantitative research. More particularly she has a keen eye for concepts that have gradually come to cover up and hence blur phenomenal differences. For example, although labor and work are phenomenally distinct, Arendt argues, this distinction has been lost in all European languages. Over time, the words and concepts have been amalgamated and come to be used synonymously.<sup>198</sup> Only stories can reveal the distinctness of these phenomena.

It is important to note that distinguishing between experiences does not mean separating them for Arendt.<sup>199</sup> For example, although she distinguishes between who and what we are, Arendt did not think that who we are is completely independent from what we are.<sup>200</sup> The same goes for the distinction between the social and the political. Arendt never thought that social matters do not play a role in the political.<sup>201</sup> The many paradoxes in her thought are a good example of this feature of distinctions, for paradoxes contain different experiences that are nonetheless not separate but related.

### **Finally: *Zu den Sachen selbst!* and the broken thread of tradition**

Arendt's adherence to the phenomenological motto *Zu den Sachen selbst!* implies the stance of the scholar-as-engaged-spectator. Cultivating an ethos of commitment to events, s/he critically examines and brackets her prejudices and opens herself up to the newness of phenomena. As decisive as its phenomenological inspiration is its historical and political background. Arendt's rejection of metaphysical and scientific method refers to a deep and acutely felt sense that 'the thread of tradition is broken'.<sup>202</sup> Here, form, or method, and

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<sup>197</sup> 'A reply', EU, 407.

<sup>198</sup> Cf. Young-Bruehl, 1982, 405; Taminaux, 1999, 43.

<sup>199</sup> For this reason, I use the term 'distinction' for Arendt's method and 'dualism' for the metaphysical and scientific method. While distinctions preserve the relation between different experiences, dualisms separate them. On metaphysical and scientific dualism, see the conclusion of chapter 2.

<sup>200</sup> I will explain the what and the who and the distinction between the two in chapter 2.

<sup>201</sup> In chapter 8, I will suggest we regard them as two perspectives on an issue, which relate like a *Gestaltswitch*.

<sup>202</sup> The phrase 'The thread of tradition is broken' occurs in LOM I, 212; cf. 'Preface', BPF; UP, 310-11, 321.

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content of her work coincide. The ascent of totalitarianism had accomplished a decisive rupture with tradition. This fact confronts historiography with the methodological challenge of writing about the unprecedented.<sup>203</sup> Tradition is no longer accessible to us in the sense that norms, measures, standards and yardsticks that are handed down, no longer apply and do no longer provide adequate frames of reference for understanding the meaning of contemporary problems and phenomena. Gradually, they become anachronisms: “the pillars of the best-known truths’... today lie shattered’.<sup>204</sup> Arendt does not just regret this fact. The loss of tradition also opens up a space for a new type of research ‘that needs no pillars and props, no standards or tradition to move freely over unfamiliar terrain’.<sup>205</sup> As such, it enables ‘free thinking which employs neither history nor coercive logic as crutches’<sup>206</sup>, in short, ‘thinking without banisters’. The rupture of tradition therefore also provides an opportunity to regain a sense of reality, to see with ‘von der Philosophie ungetrübten Augen’.<sup>207</sup> This means casting off the ballast of the metaphysical tradition, which, as we have seen, fostered an ideological disengagement from reality.

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<sup>203</sup> Dianna Taylor, 2004; Benhabib, 1990; Disch, 1994, 144. Cf. Luban, 1983, 241-42 on the differences between ancient and modern narratives.

<sup>204</sup> MDT, 10. Arendt quotes Lessing here.

<sup>205</sup> MDT, 10.

<sup>206</sup> MDT, 8.

<sup>207</sup> ZP, 45.

