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Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world

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Chapter 2

Phenomenological anthropology

In the present chapter I will address Arendt's phenomenological challenge of and alternative for the scientific and metaphysical conceptions of human existence in terms of human nature and subject status. I will put, as it were, flesh to the bones and give a more substantial account of Arendt's phenomenological method. Since Arendt's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach of the political is first and foremost directed at understanding the worldliness of human existence, I will present it as an existential phenomenology or phenomenological anthropology of the political. The key presupposition of Arendt's anthropology is that human existence is above all worldly existence. We are situated in the world, which means that we are both shaping and shaped by the world, which is public, visible and common to all. Arendt shares Heidegger's understanding of 'being-in-the-world', though putting a much stronger emphasis on being-in-the-world-with-different-others, that is, on human plurality. Arendt regards the world as the material and immaterial dwelling place for human beings on earth and, as such, both content and context of human existence.

Arendt's phenomenological anthropology challenges metaphysical and scientific definitions of a universal and eternal human nature. Such a human essence or nature transcending history and geography is called the 'subject', 'self', or 'Man'. In the metaphysical tradition, Man is typically regarded as rational and sometimes compassionate (Rousseau), as universal due to our common rationality and sovereign¹. The life sciences, neurosciences and social sciences, including sociology, psychology, economics and law, have developed a whole range of widely divergent definitions of human nature, which suit the purposes of explanation and prediction of human behavior. Significant examples include, in economic science, *homo economicus*, which refers to man as behaving self-interestedly and for this purpose acts rationally and calculatingly; a drive machine (Freud); a computer or robot-like collection of neurological mechanisms and biochemical processes

¹ Today, the 'sovereign self' is often called the 'atomistic', 'unencumbered' or 'monological' self, for example in the work of communitarians like Charles Taylor, 1992 and in feminist philosophers like Seyla Benhabib, 1992b. By 'sovereignty' I mean radical autonomy or autarky or complete authorship with respect to one's life.

(cognitive sciences, neurosciences, robotics); bipedal primates of the species *homo sapiens* (life-sciences); social beings or bearers of social roles (sociology); bearer of human dignity (law); *animal symbolicum*; God's creation, etc. If used as absolute, conclusive and comprehensive models for the explanation and prediction of human behavior, such definitions are scientific. Scientific definitions of human nature are reductionist because they generalize specific explanatory accounts, thereby reducing the differentiated complexity of human life to a single feature or a few traits.

The purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct Arendt's phenomenological anthropology and to argue how it challenges the essentialism or naturalism of the metaphysical tradition in particular. Following from her reflections on the totalitarian experience, I will argue, Arendt's existential anthropology is an excellent example of the experience-based political research, the method of which I sketched in chapter 1. I will therefore start with a discussion of her analysis of the totalitarian experience of loss of world (§1). This analysis, I will argue, informed the development of her existential phenomenology of the worldly human condition. The loss of world, the experiential counterpart of what is from an external perspective a destruction of world, taught her to appreciate what is at stake, experientially and politically, in maintaining the world and in taking human beings as worldly beings in the first place. Next, I will discuss the development of the more systematic phenomenological anthropological frame in *The human condition* (§2). After my discussion of Arendt's phenomenological anthropology from the perspective of the experiencing person in the first two sections, I will change perspectives in §3 and take a closer look at the environment, reality, in which the person finds herself. For this purpose, I will reconstruct Arendt's phenomenological topology of reality, consisting in nature, the material world and the intersubjective world. §4 will focus on the relation between the condition of plurality and the world that yields a particularly intersubjective phenomenological anthropology. In conclusion, I will briefly summarize the position of Arendt's hermeneutic and anthropological phenomenology of the political in relation to phenomenology, metaphysics, empiricism and postmodernism. I will make some concluding remarks on the various ways in which Arendt, most of the time implicitly, deconstructs metaphysics and scientism both methodologically and anthropologically.

1. Anthropological starting point: the totalitarian experience

I consider *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as an analysis of the existential meaning of totalitarianism, or in other words, of the totalitarian experience.² What makes totalitarianism an unprecedented phenomenon, Arendt held, is that it puts at stake human existence and human experience itself. By means of an analysis of those aspects of human existence totalitarianism disables, *The origins of totalitarianism* offers clues to a diagnosis of the political human condition.

The people who were deported to the death camps from 1942, were exposed to the ultimate ‘experiment’³ in the annihilation of individuals’ personality. The individual with a unique life story is reduced to his or her physiological functions, i.e. to mere organic or bare life. This process of what I call ‘naturalization’ or ‘natural reduction’, passed through three phases. First, Arendt writes, one is deprived of one’s juridical personality; then of one’s moral personality; and finally of one’s unique individuality and spontaneity. Totalitarianism aspires the extermination of irreducible human spontaneity and indeterminacy. What one is left with when, indeed, individuals’ spontaneity has been annihilated, are no more than ‘uncomplaining animals’⁴, interchangeable ‘bundles of reactions’⁵ and ‘ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov’s experiments’⁶. ‘Actually the experience of the concentration camps does show that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal’, Arendt notes.⁷ From this observation, Arendt draws the following conclusion: ‘[H]uman ‘nature’ is only ‘human’ insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.’⁸ The 20th century had witnessed this natural reduction before. Arendt describes the fate of millions of people in interwar Europe who had become stateless after the disintegration of the former multi-ethnic empires and as a consequence could turn nowhere and to no one. Similar to the fate of deported Jews some decennia later, whose juridical personalities were seized at the gates of Auschwitz, the stateless were deprived of their national citizenship and hence of their claims to any rights whatsoever

² In particular the sections ‘Total domination’ (437-59); and chapter 13, ‘Ideology and terror’ (460-82) are exemplary for this reading.

³ Arendt describes the camps as the ‘laboratories’ for the experiment showing that ‘everything is possible’ (OT, 437).

⁴ OT, 439.

⁵ OT, 438.

⁶ OT, 455.

⁷ OT, 455.

⁸ OT, 455.

and had in fact only kept their organic life.⁹ Likewise, the refugees of the Third Reich, including Arendt herself, who managed to flee Germany and occupied Europe in the years preceding the *Endlösung*, were robbed of their citizenship. The true catastrophe of being an outlaw resides in being reduced to one's natural state. This reduction implies the destruction of the world as well. The destruction or loss of world is tied to the 'basic experience in the living-together of men'¹⁰ under (pre-)totalitarian conditions, which Arendt calls either superfluousness, or organized or mass isolation. The totalitarian experience taught Arendt that people need both temporary solitude, and a shared worldly space of being-together.¹¹ Solitude turns into the pathological condition of isolation when the common world that secures being-together is destroyed and people thus become distinct without being together.¹² This is what happens under totalitarian conditions. She describes this experience as that of 'not belonging to the world at all', which is, she adds, 'among the most radical and desperate experiences of man'.¹³ Arendt demonstrates that during the 19th and the 20th centuries ever more groups of people in the industrialized European countries were made or declared superfluous as a consequence of a number of social, economic and political mechanisms. This experience of redundancy made up one of the prerequisites for the emergence of imperialism and the crimes perpetrated in the overseas colonies, especially 'the scramble for Africa'.¹⁴ Superfluous people, Arendt asserts, are capable of doing anything when they are thrown back upon themselves in a world unknown to them and in which the domestic moral rules no longer apply. 'Anything, anything can be done in this country'.¹⁵ There is no account which captures this insight in the experience of Empire as accurately as the story of the corruption of imperialist Captain Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness* (1902).

He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land. (...) You can't understand. How could you? - with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the

⁹ I will elaborate this argument in chapter 7.

¹⁰ OT, 474.

¹¹ I use the term 'being-together', to avoid confusion with the term 'society'. With 'being-together' I want to refer to the political bond between citizens, where for Arendt society or the social is exactly not political. For the distinction between the social and the political, see Introduction Part III and chapter 8.

¹² Similarly, Arendt concluded that being-together turns into fusion, when people are together without being distinct. I will call this the paradox of isolation and fusion in §4 of this chapter and in the Introduction to part II.

¹³ OT, 475.

¹⁴ Race-thinking constituted another prerequisite according to Arendt. Never did she suggest a mono-causal explanation for imperialism, for reasons discussed in chapter 1.

¹⁵ Conrad, 1983 [1902], 64.

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butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums - how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude - utter solitude without a policeman - by the way of silence - utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference.¹⁶

The essence of the experience of superfluosness is being uprooted and loosing a stabile point of reference that people share. Conrad's Captain Kurtz is the perfect embodiment of this experience:

There was nothing either above or below him (...). He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces.¹⁷

Since superfluous people do not inhabit a place in the world, they no longer have access to the framework that is anchored in the common world and which provides individuals with a shared perspective. As a consequence, they are extremely susceptible to ideological manipulation, because they potentially believe anything and anyone.

Although periodic solitude is 'a fundamental experience of human life'¹⁸, unmitigated isolation is unbearable. Through instilling fear, totalitarianism destroys 'the togetherness of men'¹⁹, i.e. human plurality. It isolates people against each other and replaces it by the mere presence of others. The result is powerlessness, that is, the loss of the capacity of concerted, associative and plural action and 'the destruction of rapports, the drying up of the whole sphere of human relationships, the 'quiet of the cemetery and the desert''²⁰.

Isolation and superfluosness are the result of a potent and destructive mixture of terror and ideology, the two elements of any totalitarian system. Ideology is the principle of action of totalitarianism.²¹ Totalitarian ideologies claim a total, absolute explanation of reality. This explanation is derived from only one idea, for example 'race', which constitutes its basic given premise. Totalitarian ideology is not interested in reality as experienced, Arendt argues, but projects an idea, an absolute, rational truth, which is presented as 'the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe'²², onto history and nature and coerces reality to conform to its rules. As such, ideology achieves 'emancipation from the

¹⁶ Conrad, 1983 [1902], 85-86.

¹⁷ Conrad, 1983 [1902], 107.

¹⁸ OT, 475.

¹⁹ 'Montesquieu's revision of the tradition', PP, 69.

²⁰ Arendt, 'Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de', 1955, archive number 024192.

²¹ OT, 457-74.

²² OT, 457-58.

reality that we perceive with our five senses²³ and replaces it with a kind of ‘supersense’²⁴, which is in fact synonymous with ‘non-sense’²⁵. By asserting a single rational truth as the explanation of reality as a whole, totalitarian ideology annuls the plurality of perspectives people have on the world and their sense of reality and freedom.

Totalitarian terror achieves the same, through the application of various instrument of violence. Apparently innocuous legal measures are applied, such as de-juridification and de-nationalization, but violence is also directly perpetrated upon the body through persecution, expulsion or deportation, imprisonment and annihilation in concentration camps). Arendt describes the loss of world totalitarian terror in general brings about, as the destruction of the space between people and hence of freedom:

[Terror] substitute[s] for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions. (...) By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them.²⁶

This space between people is ‘the living space of freedom’²⁷, which requires protection by law, that is, positive, man-made, law. This is exactly what totalitarian governments abolish. This means, Arendt says, that laws lose their role and meaning as ‘stabilizing factors for the ever changing movements of men’²⁸ and as frameworks of stability within which action can take place. In tandem, terror and ideology destroy the plurality of human perspectives as expressed in judgments, opinions, stories, etc., by treating individuals ‘as if all of humanity were just one individual’²⁹. As a consequence, totalitarianism destroys worlds, as Arendt was to show most impressively in her report of the trial of Eichmann in 1963. What made the crimes the Nazi regime perpetrated unprecedented, Arendt argued, was their ‘attack upon human diversity as such’³⁰, because the *Endlösung* pursued the physical extermination of the entire Jewish people.³¹ Then ‘the new crime, the crime against humanity - in the

²³ OT, 470.

²⁴ OT, 470-73.

²⁵ OT, 457-58.

²⁶ OT, 465-66; cf. MDT, 31.

²⁷ OT, 466.

²⁸ OT, 463.

²⁹ OT, 438.

³⁰ EJ, 268-69.

³¹ The reason why the crimes Eichmann committed could not be captured by any previously known crime, such as ‘crime against the Jewish people’; anti-Semitism being as old as mankind himself. ‘Only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism.’ (EJ, 269).

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sense of a crime ‘against the human status’, or against the very nature of mankind - appeared.³²

Now, what is lost in the totalitarian experience of loss of world? This is an important question, if we are interested in the non-pathological political human condition. It is my suggestion that Arendt learned about the latter through a *via negativa*. She saw the human condition as the mirror image of the totalitarian experience. First, people who are deprived of their rights and are reduced to biological life, reveal the very condition of political life, which is sharing a world with others, ‘which is the result of our common and coordinated effort.’³³ What terror and ideology destroy in tandem is the artificial dimension of human being-together, i.e. the law and the political community, which human beings create by mutually granting each other rights and duties. Politically, a loss of world means a loss of a lawful, political community, which offers stable juridical institutions and a stage where people interact. In interaction, people shape their lives and show who they are. Without membership in such a community, i.e. without civil and human rights, one is deprived of ‘a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective.’³⁴ Arendt argues that the fate of stateless people reveals that the loss of world refers to the existential level of lived experience or of our sense of belonging to a particular political community, as distinguished from juridical abstractions such as the loss of nationality, citizenship or human rights. What is at stake are (relative) stability and legal protection.

Second, totalitarianism destroys a less tangible though equally important quality of human existence and being-together, which is the human plurality of stories, judgments and opinions. More concretely, at stake are the world’s commonality, its meaningfulness, its reality and freedom.³⁵ The fear totalitarian terror induces isolates people against each other; totalitarian ideology wipes out the articulation of various perspectives, stories, opinions, and judgments on the same reality upon which the existence of a common world is dependent. Notice that isolation for Arendt refers to a lack of difference from others and being too close to them, rather than to a mere absence of others or to being too distant from them. By disabling discourse between people, totalitarian isolation subsequently destroys meaningfulness which in Arendt’s view is not a function of a transcendent extra-human source, such as God, Nature or the laws of History. Nor, however, is it the product of human intentions or motives. It is generated intersubjectively, in the interaction between

³² EJ, 268.

³³ OT, 302.

³⁴ OT, 296. More exactly: the ‘right to action’ and the ‘right to speech’ (OT, 296); however, it may be inferred from the immediate context of these phrases that ‘right’ in these instances is not to be taken in any positive juridical sense. ‘Right’ here means: having the possibility of access to.

³⁵ Vasterling, 2002, 158-60.

people, that is, in the space between them. Ultimately, isolation undermines one's sense of self and sense of reality. Apparently, we cannot maintain our sense of self very long outside the company of others, i.e. others who, as a rule, are really different from us due to the fact of plurality. Reality, our sense of realness of the external world as well as of our own selves, is intersubjective. It depends on sharing a world with others. To maintain a sense of self, we need the recognition of others who are embedded in a world we share with them. '[O]ne's own self (...) can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals.'³⁶

It is this shared world that makes it possible for us to distinguish self from other, fact from fantasy. This shared world is threatened (...) by withdrawal into a fantasy world in which only the self and eventually only a fantasy of the self – for a self cannot sustain itself as a self for very long in isolation – and the fantasy world it invents exist. (...) [W]ithout a world that is a shared reality there is no self, no other, no humanity. There is only fantasy, mechanics, logic, and repetition without meaning. (...) Only when there are political conditions which make it possible for others to oppose our fantasy, to question our claims, to resist our view of the world by opposing theirs to it, only when there is a voice that can say 'but the king has no clothes' and be heard, can there be intersubjectivity and thus subjectivity and not mere delusion.³⁷

Even our 'sense of the reality'³⁸ of the external world is dependent upon the confirmation of others. Without a shared world, people are left to a sense of unreality, perhaps best compared to the experience of dreaming or sleepwalking. The world, then, has become one-dimensional or uniform.

Only where things can be seen in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear. (...) Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed by the 'common nature' of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object.³⁹

Only the experience of sharing a world with equal others who both recognize us and our place in that world, ensures that we acquire a sense of reality: 'the presence of others, who see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves.'⁴⁰ Stories,

³⁶ OT, 475.

³⁷ Meehan, 2002, 186, 191.

³⁸ HC, 208.

³⁹ HC, 57-58.

⁴⁰ HC, 50; cf. OT, 477 and HC, 208.

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opinions and judgments, which presuppose the presence of others, play a constitutive role as they confer the quality of reality on the intersubjective, immaterial, and therefore highly fragile, aspect of the world.⁴¹ Totalitarian ideology, including propaganda, affects the very roots of reality, since it teaches us to distrust our sense perception and common sense. Conrad's *Heart of darkness* again powerfully clarifies the protagonists' sense of 'weird unreality', alienation and narrowing of awareness and the illusion of being lost in a shadow world, insulated from the rest of the world:

The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and our ears were concerned.

Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind.⁴²

Arendt describes the extermination camps as dream-like, or rather nightmarish. 'All the conditions which make a world real were absent; there were no consequences connected to actions, no recognition of individuality, no intelligible meaning to events, nothing that made sense because there was no world that could be shared.'⁴³

Finally, totalitarianism aspires to destroy human spontaneity, the human capacity to start something unexpected and unprecedented that Arendt later identified as the principle of freedom. Spontaneity is destroyed both in the laboratories of the totalitarian experiment, the camps, and through the logic of ideology, the tyranny of logical deduction and a truth that purports to explain everything.

2. Arendt's phenomenology of the *vita activa*

Arendt's phenomenological anthropology is, I suggest, rooted in her reflections on the totalitarian experience. It made her discover the importance of especially human plurality and natality and provoked a deep distrust with respect to metaphysical and scientific conceptions of a universal human nature.⁴⁴ Instead, she asks how different human activities each in their own way contribute to the establishment of a human world and which the conditions are for these contributions.⁴⁵ Arendt's analysis focuses upon the way in which human experience and existence is shaped in relation to a number of conditions; respectively life itself, worldliness, plurality and natality. Human conditions are features of the common human situation. Together they constitute the coordinates within which human existence unfolds. They combine naturally given circumstances with conditions

⁴¹ Vasterling, 2002, 158-60.

⁴² Conrad, 1983 [1902], 74.

⁴³ Meehan, 2002, 191.

⁴⁴ HC, 10, 193.

⁴⁵ Vollrath, 1979a, 35.

human beings create themselves in a bidirectional mode: they determine human existence and are determined by it in return.⁴⁶ Human conditions comprise both prerequisites for human existence, on the one hand, and determinations of human existence, on the other hand. The first enables freedom; the latter constrains freedom, that is, the determinations of human existence pose the limits within which freedom may be realized.⁴⁷ In other words, human beings and their natural and worldly environment are mutually conditional. The human conditions point to the interaction between people and the common world rather than to a common nature. Because of their conditioned existence, the relation between human beings and their environment is circular, but, again, not in the way of a vicious circle. Additionally, unlike the idea of human nature, a condition may or may not be realized, depending on other conditions and circumstances. And unlike an essential characteristic, a condition is not a causal mechanism or a one-way determination. By opening up the horizon of the future, the human conditions preserve freedom. Notice that the phenomenological background of the idea of conditionality ensures that conditions are both constants of human experience and existence and historically variable in their particular constellations and combinations: ‘in different historical periods, the terms are differently connected, and the concepts men have of the terms vary with the different connections.’⁴⁸

Each of the human conditions is associated with particular activities which together constitute the *vita activa*: labor, work and action; temporal modes, i.e. futility, durability and fragility; and spatial modes, i.e. nature, the material world and the intersubjective world. Also, each of the conditions is connected to a particular role human beings typically fulfill from time to time or under a particular perspective: *animal laborans*, *homo faber* and citizen or ζῷον πολιτικόν. Note that these are roles rather than particular, essentialist human types. I will now discuss each of the human conditions in relation to the human activities, the human spatial and temporal modes and the human roles, and sketch their respective phenomenological background in the totalitarian experience.

The condition of life itself concerns our embodiment and our embeddedness in earthly nature; the features of which are typically experienced as unchangeable and necessary. This condition corresponds to the activity of labor, including care and consumption, which serves production and reproduction, the maintenance of the human organism. The natural needs of the human body are endless, forever recurring, cyclical and continuous, and can never be satisfied definitively. For this reason, the temporality of life itself is futility. The human role connected to the condition of life itself is *animal laborans*,

⁴⁶ Krüger, 2007, 612.

⁴⁷ Vollrath, 1979a, 34.

⁴⁸ Young-Bruehl, 1982, 319-20.

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that is, humans in their capacity as laboring, caring and consuming beings. The condition of life itself is a-political. As *animal laborans*, we are no more than replicas of the species *homo sapiens*, that is, we are all the same, rather than equal, and lack the unique identity that distinguishes us from others. As a consequence, from the perspective of life itself, there is no real being-together of distinct human beings, but rather the isolation of a homogenous group which lacks the differences that enable being-together in the first place. Life itself is embedded in nature. As such, it is not typically human, because it is not worldly. This worldlessness, however, is of a temporary nature, for by far most people's lives are not entirely spent laboring, caring or consuming.

The imperial and totalitarian experience taught Arendt to appreciate, even to celebrate, the artificiality of agreements, conventions and the law as protections against the naturalization of human beings.⁴⁹ The condition of worldliness refers to the man-made environment required for raising a properly human existence. The sphere of humanly constructed things, including institutions and the law, in short, the material world, represents the element of utility in human existence. The material world comes into being in the activity of work in the hands of *homo faber*. The reification and de-naturalization which the human artifact inserts in the world, offers a stable foundation for human life that protects humans against natural processes. Worldliness corresponds to the temporality of durability, and although this durability is relative - man-made things are obviously subject to decay - it is more stable than both nature and the immaterial human affairs which are ephemeral as a matter of course. The notion of worldliness has, however, a broader meaning, referring not only to the condition of the material world, but also to the human embeddedness in the intersubjective world.⁵⁰

Finally, the conditions of plurality and natality are associated with the human activities of action and speech which bring about the immaterial, intersubjective space of stories, opinions, judgments, relationships, etc. The rest of this section will be entirely devoted to these conditions. Contrary to the tangibility of the material world, the intersubjective world is an entirely immaterial space.⁵¹ It is the home of men-as-citizens, of individuals as politically acting and speaking beings, ζῶον πολιτικόν. Action in Arendt's sense of the word can best be understood as interaction or participation. The temporal mode of plurality is fragility, more particularly irreversibility, unpredictability and uncontrollability. Deeds and words run the risk of not even surviving their own

⁴⁹ HC, chapter IV; cf. Canovan, 1992, 108-10.

⁵⁰ Hence I disagree with Canovan (1992) who restricts the meaning of world in Arendt's work to its aspect of objectivity and takes the public realm as more encompassing than world.

⁵¹ Instead of 'intersubjective', Jaeggi (1997) calls this dimension of world 'communicative' (which she, just like me, distinguishes from the world of things, *die Dingwelt*).

performance. Each act is marked by unpredictability due to plurality. Action is unpredictable, because it is impossible to know for sure in advance what consequences it will have. One never knows what one effects when acting, because of the fact no one is ever the sole inhabitant of the world. Plurality also ensures that the effects of action and speech cannot be undone; hence the feature of irreversibility. Due to plural nature of the intersubjective world, the meaning of one's deeds and words can never be secured or guaranteed in advance. For this reason, action is dangerous; much more dangerous than work and labor. Action, finally, is uncontrollable, because its outcome cannot be controlled. We are incapable of determining if, what and how phenomena will develop. One cannot completely control the outcome of action. Only when acting completely solitarily, in the vacuum of a laboratory, could we at least hypothetically control the results of our deeds. In real life, however, we will never find ourselves in such a situation, because we always act in a plural world.⁵²

Because of its uncontrollability, irreversibility and unpredictability, action is contingent. Nothing that has happened was necessary; not that it happened, nor the way in which it happened.⁵³ The outcome of action lacks any necessity; it is never compelling. Contingency is the condition of newness, of action as beginning and initiative. As such, contingency enables freedom.⁵⁴ I will return to this issue below, in my discussion of the condition of natality.

Plurality is not just a description of human reality, but it is also has normative meaning. At issue in the public sphere is first of all the protection and preservation of the diversity of people. Plurality is crucial in Arendt's intersubjective anthropology, her account of human being-together-in-the world. The emphasis Arendt puts on speech is telling. This human capacity is so closely connected to action that they seem to be near-identical: all examples Arendt gives of action are in fact speech-acts. The closest Arendt comes to a definition of human nature is by singling out the capacity of speech, '[d]as, was an einem Menschen das Flüchtigste und doch zugleich das größte ist'.⁵⁵ Human beings, Arendt asserts, can neither be defined as rational beings, nor, for that matter, as emotionally sensitive or compassionate beings, as Rousseau has it. If something could be predicated of

⁵² HC, 234. The rest of the sentence reads: 'and not, as the tradition since Plato holds, because of man's limited strength, which makes him depend upon the help of others.'

⁵³ Vollrath, 1979b, 93.

⁵⁴ Vasterling argues that contingency is the necessary though not sufficient condition of newness and freedom. It is not sufficient, for human action always has unpredictable, but not always new outcomes. Action always brings about change, but change does not always imply a new beginning (Vasterling, 2011a)

⁵⁵ 'that which is most volatile, yet simultaneously most grandiose in a human being', funeral oratory for Jaspers, March 4, 1969, Köhler und Saner, 1985, 719-20.

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human beings at all, it would be that they are ‘speaking animals’, ζῶον λόγον ἔχον.⁵⁶ And speech only makes sense when used in company. Speech is neither natural nor universal, since it withers away in protracted absence of the company of others. Speech is a worldly, not a natural predicate of human existence, in that it withers away outside the context of the world we share with others. Speech principally presupposes the presence of others, unlike reason or feeling, which are monological and speechless.⁵⁷ ‘The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated.’⁵⁸

The ‘who’, the ‘what’ and the person’s life-story

In acting in public space and talking about a worldly issue, the person discloses who she is. Arendt defines who we are as the ‘living essence’ of the person.⁵⁹ What we are is the sum of our objectifiable features; the properties an individual shares with many others, including markers of collective identity, such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Who we are, on the contrary, refers to our non-objectifiable unique and incomparable life-stories. Typical for Arendt is that she relates the disclosure of the who to the person’s public appearance and interaction. Interaction in public always also implies self-display, according to her.

Man express[es] [his] distinction [from others] and distinguish himself, and (...) he can communicate himself and not merely something – thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear.(...) Through [speech and action], men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men.⁶⁰

Who-ness is the typically human aspect of identity because of its dependence upon speech and action which are reserved for human beings. Although animals also exhibit an ‘urge towards self-display’, only human beings in Arendt’s view turn self-display into ‘self-presentation’ in deeds and words.⁶¹ Decisive is choice; the ‘active’, ‘conscious’ and ‘deliberative’ choice of how one ‘wishes’ to appear, ‘what to show and what to hide’ and of what one thinks is ‘fit to be seen and what is not.’⁶² Unlike many contemporary

⁵⁶ LOM I: 88; cf. HC, 178-79, among others.

⁵⁷ Arendt, 1990, ‘Philosophy and politics’, 85.

⁵⁸ *The Federalist*, No. 49, February 5, 1788. Its author is most likely James Madison. The first part of the sentence is quoted in OR, 227, 22.

⁵⁹ HC, 181.

⁶⁰ HC, 176.

⁶¹ IN HC, the emphasis is on self-display, in LOM I on self-presentation. ‘In addition to the urge towards self-display, by which living things fit themselves into a world of appearances, men also *present* themselves in deed and word.’ (LOM I, 34).

⁶² LOM I, 34, 36.

postmodernist scholars, Arendt asserts the existence of a doer behind the deed, provided that ‘behind’ is not taken in the hierarchical sense of metaphysical two-world theories. It is important, however, not to confuse the intentionality of initiative and choice with control. Deliberate choice should not be confused with the illusion that ‘Man (...) has created himself.’⁶³ The who which appears is an epiphenomenon of our words and deeds rather than a project, something we can manipulate, control and master completely. The doer does not determine the meaning of her deeds, nor master her own appearance completely. The disclosure of the who, Arendt warns, ‘can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this ‘who’ in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities.’⁶⁴ Although I choose to make my appearance in deeds and words, I cannot determine how others perceive my words and deeds. The meaning of my words and who I am, are in the eyes of the beholder, that is, the spectator’s, due to the plurality of the world. Arendt applies the metaphor of the δαίμων and the actor in a play for the political agent in order to grasp this plural dimension of ‘who-ness’. Δαίμων in Greek mythology, Arendt argues, is a divinity which ‘accompanies man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.’⁶⁵ Therefore, it is the person as it shows itself to others though it ‘always remains hidden from the person himself’. Who we are constitutes our own blind spot since we do not appear to ourselves directly as we do to others and others do to us.⁶⁶ Or rather, there is no person independent from or beyond appearing and being perceived by spectators.⁶⁷ The political actor or agent is not the author of her story. ‘[T]he stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.’⁶⁸

The who eventually defies definition, the determination of a list of one’s personal traits, qualities, motives, preferences, one’s emotional make-up and the features of one’s

⁶³ LOM I, 37.

⁶⁴ HC, 179.

⁶⁵ Arendt, 1987, ‘labor, work, action’, 40. In both Xenophon’s and Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates claimed to have a δαιμόνιον, a small δαίμων, an inner guiding quasi-divine, though in fact fully secular, voice, that warned him against mistakes but never told him what to do. However, this is actually more of an interior principle, what Arendt calls conscience, than an apparent one. Actually, Arendt rather evokes the figure of the *genius* in Roman mythology, a kind of personal guardian spirit, accompanying each person. Cf. HC, 179-80.

⁶⁶ Visker, 2007, 40.

⁶⁷ Cf. HC, 10-11, 178-88, 193, 206, 211.

⁶⁸ HC, 184.

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social identities, such as being born then and there, as a child of that and that mother and father, male or female, black or white, etc. Such features instead compose what one is.⁶⁹

Motives and aims, no matter how pure or how grandiose, are never unique; like psychological qualities, they are typical, characteristic of different types of persons. Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement.⁷⁰

The person can never be reduced to what it is, neither on the level of the individual, nor the level of the species *homo sapiens*, without losing what makes it most distinct. Such objectification is exactly what happens in one-sided, absolute metaphysical or scientific definitions of human nature, for example *animal rationale*, a bundle of affects, a complex ape, etc. Arendt compares the who with Greek oracles that ‘neither reveal nor hide in words, but give manifest signs’⁷¹, namely in stories. This is the existential dimension of narrativity.⁷² Stories have the potential to be faithful to the phenomenal nature of the political, i.e. its character of appearance and disclosure. More exactly, stories are ‘the outcome of action’⁷³. Histories relate of acting people and their words and deeds, in the process doing justice to the outside, the surface of the political, instead of hidden motives, for example; and second, to individual experience. As a consequence, stories are political in themselves, not just because their substance consists in political phenomena and events, but also because they fit the nature of action as appearance and disclosure. If people disclose who they are in action and speech, stories have the same disclosive effect. They are the ‘phenomenal appearance on paper of political lives’⁷⁴. Stories are not only media of disclosure, but are in themselves a space of appearance, because people’s lives have to be told and read, recognized by others. The appearing who is dynamic, for it exists only as long as the performance and interaction last. The performing and interacting person acquires a certain solidity in its biography. In Arendt’s conception of the hermeneutics of the person, we do not have direct access to our own, current selves⁷⁵; nor is this a true, deep, inner or hidden self to be discovered by means of soul searching or introspection. Having a story, in the sense of playing a part in one’s own life and subsequently being noticed, recognized and remembered, procures appearance as a who.

⁶⁹ HC, 179.

⁷⁰ HC, 206; cf. OR, 96, 98.

⁷¹ HC, 182.

⁷² In chapter 1, I addressed its methodological aspect.

⁷³ HC, 164.

⁷⁴ Herzog, 2001, 187.

⁷⁵ I guess this is one of the reasons for Arendt to speak of the heart’s darkness.

Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero — his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only what he is or was.⁷⁶ This unchangeable identity of the person, though disclosing itself intangibly in act and speech, become tangible only in the story of the actor's and speaker's life.⁷⁷

Who we are is an effect of interaction and appearance in deeds and words, rather than of an innate self or soul, and is therefore open-ended. This follows from Arendt's phenomenological foregrounding of appearance. Phenomenology focuses on lived experience and is confined to the investigation of appearances, i.e. phenomena. The question of Being, something which the metaphysical tradition postulated behind or beyond appearance, is bracketed. And indeed, Arendt never wished to go behind experience, to find its causes or its psychological origins, for example in an inner self. Arendt's argument to the effect that we cannot tell appearances from being, draws upon a dismantling of the metaphysical fallacy of two-world theories.⁷⁸ As argued, we only know who we are through other's perceptions, reflections and interpretations of our deeds and words that result in stories. Moreover, as actors we ourselves do not have privileged access to it. Arendt's image of the *δαίμων* suggests that others know better whom we are than we do ourselves. So the process of storytelling requires the person takes a somewhat distanced perspective upon itself, in the view backwards. But more often, we learn about our selves intersubjectively, through the view from outside, that is, through others' views on our lives, deeds and words.

What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in the consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story.⁷⁹

Ricoeur calls this 'the opaqueness of any life-story for its 'hero''.⁸⁰ We here see at play the paradoxical relationship between determining and being determined that is inherent in the phenomenological notion of human conditions.

The life-story proceeds as a compromise from the encounter between the events initiated by man as the agent of action *and* the interplay of circumstances induced by the web of human relationships.⁸¹

⁷⁶ HC, 186.

⁷⁷ HC, 193.

⁷⁸ See chapter 1.

⁷⁹ HC, 192.

⁸⁰ Ricoeur, 1983, 67.

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Self-presentation and disclosive appearance do not imply the expression or outward manifestation of an inner disposition, for example the soul or self. Disclosure does not mean that I show or reveal an inner self, i.e. 'something inside me that otherwise would not appear at all'⁸². The dualism between the subject's supposed inner life and her outward appearance is but another version of the metaphysical dichotomy of true being and mere appearance. By the same token, self-presentation is not self-expression, if by expression we mean the expression of something other than itself, more particularly of something inside, some quality or property of the person, i.e. what one is. Appearance in the Arendtian sense is self-referential. It expresses nothing other than itself. Hence her preference for the notions 'exhibit', 'display', 'performance' and 'show' instead of 'express'.

When I make such a decision, I am not merely reacting to whatever qualities may be given me; I am making an act of deliberate choice among the various potentialities of conduct which the world has presented me. Out of such acts arises finally what we call character or personality, the conglomeration of a number of identifiable qualities gathered together into a comprehensible and reliably identifiable whole, and imprinted, as it were, on an unchangeable substratum of gifts and defects peculiar to our soul and body structure.⁸³

Like all distinctions Arendt makes, the distinction between who and what is not an absolute dualism between two separate substances.⁸⁴ Although she distinguishes between them, Arendt did not think that who we are is completely independent from what we are. The who is constituted also by the what. Who we are as a whole consists in the complex interaction of everything we have done and have experienced, the situation we are in and social factors, etc. So what we are, for example white and male, is input to who we are; but the latter cannot be reduced to the first. Still, they refer to different experiential modes in which the person shows itself; 'who' for example in public action, 'what' in private and social transactions. Moreover, denying what you are, rather than accepting it, eventually undermines the possibility of becoming who you are, as Arendt shows for example in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen. Only when Varnhagen accepted her Jewishness towards the end of her life, could she become a unique person.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ricoeur, 1983, 67.

⁸² LOM I, 29.

⁸³ LOM I, 37.

⁸⁴ See chapter 1.

⁸⁵ Arendt, 1997 [1957], *Rahel Varnhagen*.

Plurality, natality and freedom

Let us return to plurality. The phenomenological background of Arendt's understanding of this human condition is her analysis of the experiences of superfluousness, isolation and powerlessness under totalitarian rule. It made her aware of the political requirements of respecting and appreciating the irreducible differences between people and of keeping open a distance between them in which these differences can flourish, the so-called inter-esse. This space in-between does not only provide the distance we need in order to become distinct individuals, but it is simultaneously a prerequisite for proper being-together, in contrast to the deceptive oneness, homogeneity or fusion of human society under conditions of totalitarianism.

The eventual failure of the aspiration to total domination brought to Arendt's attention the condition of natality. The uncontrollability and contingency of action makes up the very condition of human freedom. Due to the condition of natality are human existence and action fundamentally open, spontaneous and creative. Human action, unlike behavior, is not causally determined, neither by our past, nor by our genes, etc. However bleak her analysis in *The origins of totalitarianism*, she finishes with a hopeful conclusion about the eventually ineradicable and irreducible human spontaneity and indeterminacy, i.e. about men's capacity to begin. The well-known last paragraph of *The origins of totalitarianism* reads:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only 'message' which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom. (...) This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.⁸⁶

Arendt identifies this capacity to begin, to initiate something that did not exist before and cannot be deduced from precedents, as the principle of freedom.⁸⁷ In *The human condition* she calls this 'miraculous' ability to start something new 'natality'.⁸⁸ Like mortality, which is also one of the human conditions, in the philosophical tradition refers to the meaning of death; natality refers to the meaning of the biological fact of birth or nativity for human being-together.⁸⁹ The principle of natality is the key to human freedom. Because of the condition of plurality, each deed and word has the same unpredictable quality of making something unexpected happen. Indeed, the plurality of the common world implies that as soon as an action is initiated, it is inserted in an intersubjective network. 'Since we always act into a web of relationships, the consequences of each deed are boundless, every action

⁸⁶ OT, 478-79.

⁸⁷ OT, 473.

⁸⁸ HC, 247.

⁸⁹ Note, again, that natality cannot be separated from nativity.

touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction, every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes.⁹⁰ Thus, freedom in the Arendtian sense does not refer to freedom of choice or freedom of will, but to contingency and to the inherent spontaneity and unpredictability of action and speech. This implies that I never know what my words and deeds will bring about because of the world's inalienable plurality.

The life of the mind and the human conditions

I hope I have made it clear by now how the *vita activa* relates to the human conditions. However, though less obvious, the life of the mind is also tied to the human conditions in a paradoxical way. Arendt was convinced, on the one hand, that thinking demands a withdrawal of man-as-thinker from the visible, plural world of the human affairs into the solitude of his or her inner world. On the other hand, the thinker also belongs to the world, and is bound to the human conditions. The metaphysical tendency to totalize withdrawal from the world means that the metaphysical fallacies are various ways of ignoring the embeddedness of the life of the mind in the world and in the human conditions, in particular plurality. In the final paragraph of *The human condition*, Arendt for example writes that thinking requires freedom, the worldly public freedom that totalitarianism annuls:

Thought (...) is still possible (...), wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom. Unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory-tower independence of thinkers, no other human capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think.⁹¹

Public freedom is a condition of possibility for thinking, because it derives from discourse, the public use of reason, if it is not to wither away. Additionally, the activity of thinking itself bears an indication of the world's plurality. In the internal dialogue between 'me and myself', which is Arendt's description of the thinking process, 'I am not altogether separated from that plurality which is the world of men.'⁹² Hence, it does not come as a surprise that the last sentence of *The human condition*, and the motto of *The life of the mind I (thinking)* as well, is the following statement: 'Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.'⁹³

⁹⁰ Arendt, 1987, 'Labor, work, action', 41.

⁹¹ HC, 324.

⁹² Arendt, 1990, 'Philosophy and politics', 88.

⁹³ Cato. HC, 325.

3. Arendt's phenomenological topology of reality

Hitherto, I discussed Arendt's phenomenological anthropology from the perspective of the person. In the current section, I will reverse perspectives and take a closer look upon the environment or context in which the person finds herself, consisting in respectively nature, the material world and the intersubjective world, and attend to their phenomenal differences.⁹⁴ It is important not to take spatiality in a literal sense, as many interpreters tend to do, only to blame Arendt with essentialism.⁹⁵ Nature and the immaterial and material world, do not constitute geographically or materially separate spaces, but are different dimensions of the same earth we inhabit.

Nature and the objective world

Nature, our biological environment, is characterized by impermanence and repetitiveness, an 'eternal recurrence of the same' or 'constant movement'⁹⁶. Arendt calls the cyclical time sequence of nature 'futility'. It constitutes the 'condition of human *life*'⁹⁷ that is, of humans as biological, embodied beings. As natural beings we assume the role of *animal laborans*. This already suggests the specificity of the human condition as opposed to other animals. Humans have to labor in order to survive, because they lack the instincts and physiological specification animals have.⁹⁸ As natural beings or *animal laborans*, we are bound to the earth's vital cycles. It is only by virtue of our worldly existence' that is, by relating and contributing to both the material and the intersubjective world, that we become unique individuals, rather than members of the species *homo sapiens*, which we are by virtue of our earthly, embodied life.⁹⁹ Belonging to the world in both its material and intersubjective dimension is prerequisite for a properly human existence, as opposed to all other modes of being on earth. 'Without a world into which men are born and from which they die, there would be nothing but changeless eternal recurrence, the deathless everlastingness of the

⁹⁴ Another topology of spheres could focus on the spaces in which activities take place: private, public, social/society. These two divisions cut across each other, but do not coincide. Cf. Freud's two topical models of the psyche: the (first) dynamic topographical model (unconscious - pre-conscious - conscious) and the (second) static structural model (Id, Ego, Superego) which also cut across each other, but do not coincide. Also, Freud stresses that both systems fulfill a heuristic function, rather than pointing out parts of the brain. Cf. Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973.

⁹⁵ For example Schnell, 1995, 319-20.

⁹⁶ HC, 137.

⁹⁷ HC, 134.

⁹⁸ Cf. Gehlen, 1940.

⁹⁹ For the phenomenological distinction between the human and natural sphere of life, see Burke, 1997, 30-31 and Vasterling, 2007c, 76-77.

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human as of all other animal species.¹⁰⁰ Human beings need the freedom which may only come about in entering the intersubjective world, to counter nature's one-sided necessity. But first of all, they need the stability which the material world provides to counter nature's transience. '[T]he world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human *life* can be at home on earth.'¹⁰¹ The material world 'stands between nature and humanity'.¹⁰² During the process of manufacturing products, 'the builder or fabricator remains the sole lord and master'¹⁰³, but once it is finished, the product acquires a relative independency from its producer. Everything human beings make in the course of time, comes to obtain a certain autonomy vis-à-vis both its producer and its user.¹⁰⁴ This transcendence holds even more for works of art, which frequently are 'more and essentially greater' than the artist herself.¹⁰⁵ The material world is also an objective world. 'Objective' in this context should be taken as denoting no more than 'reified' or 'constituted by objects', i.e. material things. It is not to be confused with a normative epistemological notion of the validity of bodies of knowledge, for example the Archimedian ideal of knowledge.¹⁰⁶ For this reason, I prefer to call it the 'material' world, in order to avoid confusion.

In accordance with the logic of 'condition', artifacts obviously are things to be manipulated by human beings, but they also have a habit of themselves conditioning human existence. This is best understood as the consequence of the bi-directionality of the relationship between human beings and artifacts, i.e. the fact that artifacts, instruments, technology, works of art etc. feed back into the realm of human beings who produced them and start to serve as a human condition in their turn.

The objectivity of the world - its object- or thing-character - and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.¹⁰⁷

Technology offers good examples of this double face of artifacts as both determined, that is, instruments for human beings, and determining, that is, condition of human beings.

¹⁰⁰ HC, 96-97.

¹⁰¹ HC, 134.

¹⁰² Villa argues the objective world does not subsume nature but remains juxtaposed to it. The objective world 'provides distance *from* the natural, a distance that is necessary if we are to know or manipulate nature.' (1996, 27-28).

¹⁰³ IP, 190.

¹⁰⁴ HC, 137.

¹⁰⁵ HC, 210.

¹⁰⁶ See chapter 1.

¹⁰⁷ HC, 9.

Weapons of mass destruction, for example, may be either used as deterrents or actually be deployed in international conflicts.¹⁰⁸ They changed strategies of modern warfare and, indeed, human existence as well since they opened up the possibility of an arms race and of the complete destruction of the planet.

Arendt describes private property as the ‘most elementary’ type of worldly things: ‘the privately owned share of a common world’.¹⁰⁹ For this reason, she conceives of the expropriation of laborers during the Industrial Revolution, upon which the rise and successes of capitalism were entirely dependent, as a form of de-reification, re-naturalization or world destruction, ‘the deprivation (...) of [a] place in the world and [the] naked exposure to the exigencies of life’.¹¹⁰ Other examples of worldly things include buildings and infrastructural works such as borders, tools, arms, books, photographs, newspapers, movies, statues, flags, monuments, etc. Works of art play an exceptional and unique role among the things of the world.¹¹¹ Unlike the other products of world, they are not commodities, that is, they are ‘strictly without utility’.¹¹² Still they are potentially more durable than any commodity. Indeed, works of art have a far greater chance to be preserved to posterity than has any other artifact. This is why Arendt calls them ‘the most intensely worldly of all tangible things’.¹¹³ For example, the works of Plato and Aristotle, to the extent that they have been preserved, are as alive to us today as they must have been to their contemporaries. A second class of worldly things which is somewhat at odds with the material things I mentioned previously, are constitutions, laws, political institutions, governments, etc. Though they may be immaterial and intangible, they cannot exist without sedimentation in material things, such as codes of law, constitutional charters, parliamentary buildings, etc. Arendt insists that, as the product of fabrication, they install stability and therefore do not belong to the intersubjective world. Because of their stabilizing and solidifying role for the human affairs, they protect human being-together as effectively against the vicissitudes of nature as does the physical and visible artifact.¹¹⁴ Especially in *On revolution*, she repeatedly describes the (American) constitution as ‘the

¹⁰⁸ Arendt herself uses the example of nuclear arms in her introduction to *The human condition*.

¹⁰⁹ HC, 253.

¹¹⁰ HC, 254-55.

¹¹¹ HC, §23.

¹¹² HC, 167. For this reason, some have suggested that works of art rather belong to the sphere of action.

¹¹³ HC, 167. This implies that Arendt considers oral cultures, and nomadic peoples who make their living solely through hunting and collecting as less worldly.

¹¹⁴ Arendt describes the ‘structure’ of the ‘public context’ as ‘laws, constitutions, statutes and the like’ (IP, 106) and laws as the ‘boundaries of the world’ (IP, 190); Cf. Canovan, 1992, 108.

foundation of freedom'.¹¹⁵ The law's role and meaning is reification or de-naturalization. Laws are 'stabilizing factors for the ever changing movements of men', and provide a 'framework of stability within which human actions and motions can take place'.¹¹⁶

Arendt's insistence on the artificiality and stability of the man-made world makes sense against the background of her reflections on the totalitarian experience and statelessness I sketched before. As we saw, refugees and camp inmates who lost citizenship, that is, the protection of the law and nation-state - a process which could be called de-reification - were reduced to their biological existence - the process of re-naturalization. This came down to a complete loss of meaning and human dignity. The juxtaposition of man as a natural being and men as worldly beings may be reminiscent of the Aristotelian distinction between ζωή and βίος. The first refers to bare, naked or mere life¹¹⁷, that is, to the a- or pre-political, non-discursive aspects of life which are entirely in the service of sustenance. Βίος, on the other hand, denotes the qualified, politically relevant element of human existence. However, unlike Aristotle's, Arendt's distinction between the natural and the worldly is not metaphysical in nature, because it is not a statement about an essential and constant human nature, but a phenomenological and normative description. It is a phenomenological analysis, because Arendt takes into account the contingency of human condition, i.e. the fact it can change, as, for example, the camps have shown.¹¹⁸ It is a normative distinction, because she acknowledges that only worldliness, unlike naturalness, allows for a typically human existence. The loss of world, reversely, robs human beings of their potential for understanding, storytelling, disclosive speech and action, in short, of those capacities and qualities that Arendt regards as indispensable for a truly human, meaningful existence.

The objective and the intersubjective world

The intersubjective world 'overlays' or 'overgrows' the material world.¹¹⁹ As opposed to the latter, it is strictly immaterial or symbolic, but, Arendt insists, 'no less real'.¹²⁰ It is non-objective, i.e. not composed of tangible things, but instead of what Arendt calls the web of

¹¹⁵ Cf. 'What is authority?', BPF; on (positive) laws: OT, 'Ideology and terror', 463, 465 and 467. For literature on the law in Arendt's work, see Degryse, 2008, Cornelisse, 2007, Lindahl, 2006, Klabbers, 2007, Waldron, 2000.

¹¹⁶ In Arendt's view, the law, that is, positive law as distinguished from natural law, creates and maintains a distance between human beings through mediation, whereas in the totalitarian conception, the eternal, absolute, superhuman Law, of either history, nature or God, inscribes itself directly upon human beings.

¹¹⁷ Agamben, 1998.

¹¹⁸ For recent literature on the relation between Arendt and Aristotle, see Giesler, 2005 and Mahrtdt, 2007.

¹¹⁹ HC, 182-83.

¹²⁰ HC, 183.

relationships, i.e. the immaterial network of human interactions or human affairs and the vast range of intersubjectively generated meanings that circulate between people.¹²¹ The intersubjective world is composed of ‘deeds and words’¹²², that is, stories, opinions and judgments, and the relationships between people. As a principle, the world is public, that is, something which appears and something we have in common. Hence for Arendt, a private world is a *contradictio in adiecto*.¹²³

The first difference between the material respectively the intersubjective world, concerns the tangibility of the products of work, whereas ‘the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products.’¹²⁴ Next, the material world is created by human beings in their capacity of *homo faber*; it is the product of work, i.e. fabrication, which follows the logic of utility. The intersubjective world, by contrast, is the product of action and speech, of man qua citizen, ζῶον πολιτικόν. This latter dimension of the world is not ordered according to, or judged in terms of, standards of utility or usefulness, nor is it concerned with finding appropriate means to given ends. Instead, it is solely concerned with meaning or meaningfulness. Finally, though the permanency of the world of things is always relative – obviously time wears out any artifact – it definitely lasts far longer than the intersubjective world which bears the marks of action’s and speech’s fundamental fragility, their unpredictability, irreversibility, and uncontrollability. As a consequence, the material world requires regular maintenance to counter natural decay, but the intersubjective world needs to be attended to permanently and more radically. It needs the persistent commitment of the majority of citizens who talk about it in order to continue to exist at all. Next, it requires regular renewal, both through actions which start something unprecedented, as is expressed in the condition of natality, and through the introduction of new generations of human beings, that is, through birth.¹²⁵ The intersubjective world is more resistant to destruction than the artifact, but once it is destroyed, for example in total wars of annihilation or through terror, its consequences are far more disastrous. Since it ‘does not owe its creation to production but to human action’ it ‘cannot be produced again by human hands’, like the material world.¹²⁶ And terror curtails people’s very spontaneity and readiness to act. When the intersubjective world is

¹²¹ HC, 182-84.

¹²² HC, 183.

¹²³ Cf. Wittgenstein’s similar argument with respect to the construct of a private language.

¹²⁴ HC, 182-83.

¹²⁵ ‘The crisis in education’, BPF, 192.

¹²⁶ IP, 190.

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destroyed ‘the laws of political action are replaced by the laws of the desert’, that is, it is no longer fit for living a truly human life, because it ‘knows neither law nor politics’.¹²⁷

By distinguishing between nature and the world, on the one hand, and the material and the intersubjective world, on the other, I did not mean to separate them rigidly or to insulate them. These distinctions are phenomenological in nature and therefore not absolute. First, the contents of the material and the intersubjective world frequently defy simple classification. For example, the law is intangible, but still belongs to the material world. And works of art belong to the world of things, though they are not useful like other manufactured things and, like action, frequently transcend the artist’s original intentions, aims and motives. And the house, that is, the private sphere, including private property, is situated on the threshold between nature and the human world. But second, and more importantly, the material and intersubjective world refer to one and the same world. And nature and world are located on the same planet, that is, our planet. The world is both material and intersubjective; and men are both natural and worldly beings, depending on the perspective one takes. The two poles constitute experientially different, but interdependent dimensions of the same world.¹²⁸ A phenomenological analysis attempts to show that the materiality of the world has a different significance for human existence than its intersubjective dimension. Additionally, third, the spheres are mutually conditional. The intersubjective world is crucially dependent upon the material one. The world of things is the, necessary though not sufficient, condition of the intersubjective world, as both the topic of speech, and its stage or context. The comparison of the world with a stage underlines that intersubjective action and speech need an artificial, material environment which allows individuals to show themselves to others.

I would also like to draw attention to the significance Arendt attributes to the world of things.¹²⁹ One could say the human affairs are at least largely concerned with the human artifact.¹³⁰ It endows the most unstable dimension of the globe, the intersubjective world, with stability. ‘[W]ithout the human artifice to house them, the human affairs would be (...) floating, (...) futile and vain’.¹³¹ On the other hand: artifacts and utensils only constitute a world to the extent that they are being talked about, interpreted, discussed, evaluated, etc., that is, to the extent that they are meaningful things for human beings, instead of just a

¹²⁷ IP, 190.

¹²⁸ See chapter 1.

¹²⁹ For the Arendt’s and Heidegger’s different appreciations of the distinction between nature and the human artifact, see Taminiiaux, 1997, 13-15.

¹³⁰ Along with events, facts, states of affairs which cannot completely be reduced to objects, though of course are related to them.

¹³¹ HC, 204.

collection of otherwise disconnected things. Without the intersubjective dimension, the material world would lack meaning. Only through discourse do things, facts, events, etc. become human and meaningful, that is, worldly.¹³²

[T]he human artifice (...) unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate *raison d'être*. Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object.¹³³

The topic of debate is in fact often the material world. '[M]ost words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality'.¹³⁴ In other words, the world of things offers an 'objective frame of reference to test our impressions against reality'.¹³⁵

Together, the material and the intersubjective aspects of the world install a dwelling-place for human beings; the material world by providing stability and opening up an artificial environment which protects human beings somewhat against nature; the intersubjective world by enabling meaningfulness. The world is like a home for human beings. To avoid misunderstandings, we are not at home in the world as a matter of course. On the contrary, Arendt insists we enter the world as strangers and need to engage in various activities, such as labor, work, action, speech and understanding, and have both a private place or a house, and access to the public sphere, to become at home in it. Human beings are situated in a world 'die nicht ohne weiteres, d.h. nicht ohne politisches handeln, als eine menschliche von Menschen bewohnt werden kann'.¹³⁶ Arendt herself called this her lack of 'homesickness': 'I do not believe in a world, be it a past world or a future world, in which man's mind (...) could or should ever be comfortable at home'¹³⁷. Hence the need of material maintenance and of commitment and active participation. One has to actively involve oneself to be able to appreciate the world as a meaningful context.¹³⁸ Understanding plays an important role in this respect. Understanding may initiate processes of reconciliation with past events and of reorientation, that is, of becoming at home in the world. Understanding implies endowing contingent events with meaning, 'without

¹³² MDT, 24-25.

¹³³ HC, 204.

¹³⁴ This has led some to suggest that town planning and the like are particularly appropriate objects for politics from an Arendtian perspective.

¹³⁵ Canovan, 1985, 619.

¹³⁶ Vollrath, 1979a, 31.

¹³⁷ LOM II, 158.

¹³⁸ Vollrath, 1979a, 49 connects this to power as action in concert and the 'right to have rights' as the 'original right to a place in the world'.

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committing the error of defining it¹³⁹.¹⁴⁰ Eventually, understanding allows human coexistence, that is, sharing one and the same world.

[O]nly an ‘understanding heart’, and not mere reflection or mere feeling, makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and makes it possible for them to bear with us.¹⁴¹

Additionally, we are never completely or absolutely at home in the world. Despite its relative stability, the material world is subject to decay. And the intersubjective world needs maintenance as well. Still, Arendt never engaged in a celebration of a fundamentally human *Unheimlichkeit*, as did Heidegger, Jacques Taminiaux notes.¹⁴² Instead, it led her to embrace a stabile artifact, in particular the law, and perpetual discourse as the very condition of possibility of a properly human existence and political life.

I want to conclude this section with three final remarks on the relations between nature, the material world and the intersubjective world. First, whereas the earth comprises the natural dimension of life, the material and the intersubjective world combine to constitute the typically human dimension of reality which is the world. In other words, unlike labor, both work, on the one hand, and action and speech, on the other, are world-building activities, though for entirely different reasons. World is the meaningful space for human action and speech, unlike the ‘sublime indifference of an untouched nature’¹⁴³. Vice versa, the world entails both the tangible world of things and the intersubjective world of meanings and relations.

Second, the world consists in two tendencies pulling in opposite directions, a revolutionary and a conservative one.¹⁴⁴ The intersubjective world is the scene of the potential emergence of the new, because of the condition of natality. The material world, on the other hand, keeps both the impermanence of nature and the boundlessness of human action within limits. It also contains the material preservation of past events, for example in monuments, works of art and books. The conservative and revolutionary dimension have always ‘balanced and checked each other’.¹⁴⁵

Finally, the world is not simply the collection of everything that is, since it excludes nature and refers to the typically human world. More importantly, it is not a descriptive but

¹³⁹ MDT, 105.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. chapter 1.

¹⁴¹ UP, 322.

¹⁴² A former stateless refugee herself, Arendt used to be an example of what she herself called a pariah, i.e. a person ‘who ha[s] no place in the political and social world’, Taminiaux, 1997, 15.

¹⁴³ HC, 137.

¹⁴⁴ Canovan (1992) only has an eye for its conservatism.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Civil disobedience’, CR, 78-79.

a normative notion as well, since the world consists in the things we made ourselves in the course of many generations and the meanings and stories that circulate between people, together enabling a properly human, meaningful existence. The world, in other words, is the typically human home on earth that requires our constant attention in order to keep it a place fit for human existence.

4. The worldliness of human existence and the paradoxes of plurality

‘Politik beruht auf der Tatsache der Pluralität der Menschen.’¹⁴⁶ Plurality is *the* condition of political life, that is, it is not just its necessary condition (*conditio sine qua non*), but also its sufficient condition (*conditio per quam*).¹⁴⁷ Without plurality, there is no politics. This means that only when there is plurality, and only then, is political action possible. And whenever there is plurality, the possibility of politics exists. Because plurality is both the necessary and sufficient condition of politics, politics and plurality are equivalent. However, this does not imply that plurality is the only condition of politics. Life itself, natality and worldliness are conditions as well.

Plurality can only appear and flourish in public space, the space in which human beings are equal and in which speech is not merely instrumental, but disclosive as well. This argument should be considered against the background of Arendt’s distinction between the private and the public spheres of human existence. In the private sphere of the family and the household, human beings are just the same, or similar, but not equal. I think this is best understood as follows. As natural, biological beings, humans as such have roughly the same basic physical needs. The care for these needs belongs to the private sphere, Arendt holds. Because of our bodily vulnerability, we are dependent upon others’ care. The paradigmatic example is the bond between parents and young children. This relationship is vertical and, at least partially, instrumental. The infant’s physical, emotional and economic dependence upon its parents is absolute. In terms of needs and vulnerability, the parent-child relationship is hence asymmetrically structured. Rule is involved, in Arendt’s own terms. At least during the first years of any human life, parents, guardians or custodians are responsible for the child’s survival and wellbeing, not the reverse. This is not to deny that parents may be emotionally dependent upon their children during their infancy. However, this need is relative, the infant’s absolute. Furthermore, the communication between parents, on the one hand, and infants and young children, on the other hand, is predicated

¹⁴⁶ WiP, 9.

¹⁴⁷ HC, 7.

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upon physical vulnerability, needs and care. In short, this is an instrumental mode of communication to a large extent. Something similar applies to the bond between siblings. If only for their specific situation within the family genealogy, the relationship between brothers and / or sisters is not simply horizontal, as the relationships between citizens and self-chosen friends ideally is. Moreover, siblings relate through their parents to which they entertain a vertical relationship. Finally, the emotional dependence of children upon their parents and the intimacy between parents and their child and between the child and, if any, its siblings, easily induce loyalty or even identification. This does not foster or even discourages dissent and taking divergent views.¹⁴⁸ Whenever Arendt suggests that private relationships, especially between members of a family, are typically non-worldly and non-plural, and that, as a consequence, appearance, action and speech in the strict sense of non-instrumental, disclosive speech, is impossible in private life, she means the following.¹⁴⁹ Our bodily structure and needs, and our emotional and psychic lives that are in Arendt's view intimately connected to it, are more or less the same in all human beings as members of the species *homo sapiens*, and hence do not deserve appearance in the world. However, this sameness disappears as soon as we express our needs, feelings, passions and emotions in words. '[B]y doing so we add to them an element of reflection and thought, and even some form of decision, by which we individualize them and turn them into appearances deserving of being displayed amongst other appearances in a world that is common to a plurality of human beings', Taminioux argues.¹⁵⁰ This happens, for example, whenever parents and children start to argue about or negotiate their needs and emotions, which is, as a principle, excluded from the relationships between parents and infants that are unable to speak. So action and speech, deserving of appearance in the world, indeed are possible even in the private sphere. However, the relations and words between parents and children stop being non-worldly and non-appearing as soon as they become reflexive and discursive. Again, world and nature, the private and the public, as well as labor, work and action, do not refer to separate domains or types of persons, but to different attitudes and types of relationships.

The relation between citizens, on the other hand, is horizontal. Relations of rule, i.e. command and obedience, are by definition a-political and hence undesirable in the civic sphere.¹⁵¹ Since, strictly speaking, the plurality of human beings can only appear in public, it is only there that action, freedom and equality can occur. Arendt's notion of plurality presupposes an anthropology of human being-together, a sharing-of-the-world-with-

¹⁴⁸ I am not sure if this applies to types of families other than the Western nuclear family.

¹⁴⁹ On Arendt's thoughts on families, see DB, 16, 38; WiP, 10.

¹⁵⁰ Taminioux, 1997, 201.

¹⁵¹ Cf. HC, 33.

others. Human existence is not isolated, but always occurs and is lived within a web of relationships. Political action is impossible whenever people are isolated against each other. As a consequence, plurality is opposed to the experience of isolation. More particularly, the political concerns ‘das Zusammen- und Miteinander-Sein des *Verschiedenen*.’¹⁵² Plurality simultaneously refers to what differentiates and relates people. Therefore, plurality is a paradoxical notion.¹⁵³ I will now reconstruct and elaborate four phenomenally different aspects of this paradox, respectively difference and equality, commonality and difference, solitude and being-together or isolation and fusion, and, finally, communication and conflict.

The first, most fundamental and also most abstract and theoretical paradox I want to discuss, is the paradox of difference and equality, that is, the fact that in public space, we live ‘as a distinct and unique being among equals.’¹⁵⁴ Arendt’s notion of the political implicitly presupposes a strong norm of equality that should be guaranteed by the constitution, civil rights, the law, etc. Plurality means that as soon as we enter the public sphere, we obtain equality by showing in words and deeds our own view of the world. This view is always unique, because we are situated beings with a unique biography, each taking a different perspective on the world. This first paradox implies that difference is not opposed to equality. Difference and equality mutually presuppose one another. If we had all been the same or identical, it would make no sense to pursue equality. Equality, indeed, presupposes that a person is equal to someone else. Similarly, relevant differences can only be identified with respect to the norm of equality. ‘Because of equality, I can measure this difference’, the immense diversity of individuals.¹⁵⁵ Equality is not at all identical to sameness or similarity. Arendt distinguishes, implicitly and frequently inconsistently, between sameness and equality. Equality pertains to citizens in the public sphere, in other words, it is a political notion. Political equality is only possible under conditions of plurality and can only arise whenever citizens enter the public sphere. As a consequence, human beings are not naturally equal, as a matter of course, in Arendt’s view. This is, obviously, a highly un-modern point of view. The modern discourse of human rights, for example, is based upon the assumption that human beings are equal by nature, that is, by birth: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’¹⁵⁶ Arendt, on the contrary, argues that equality is not an inalienable human property, but only comes into being as

¹⁵² WiP, 9.

¹⁵³ Cf. paradoxes, chapter 1.

¹⁵⁴ HC, 178.

¹⁵⁵ Arendt, 1955, ‘Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, baron de’, archive numbers 024191-024192.

¹⁵⁶ Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). See chapter 7 for an elaboration of this argument.

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soon as people start to act and speak vis-à-vis each other in public space and mutually grant each other equal rights, equal treatment before the law, equal educational opportunities, etc. Political equality is always the result of equalization of differences. 'When we talk about equality, we must always ask what equalizes us,' Arendt writes. For example, '[j]urors are equalized by the task and the place.'¹⁵⁷ Equality, therefore, is a political and a normative notion that refers to an ideal or task, not a descriptive one that submits the sameness of all people. Sameness, on the other hand, is a descriptive notion that indicates the naturally given similarity of human beings. Because they belong to the same species, *homo sapiens*, human beings possess a shared biological constitution that accounts for a limited number of basic needs, such as the need for oxygen, shelter, food, water, clothing, health, care, love and the like. Since a world is lacking, members of a family, as members of a family, do not differentiate.¹⁵⁸ We are the same as human beings, but not as citizens.

A second paradox is the one of commonality and difference. We are both relational beings and unique individuals.¹⁵⁹ Only when it's the point of reference of a plurality of perspectives does the world obtain the feature of commonality. Although we take different perspectives, we talk about a world we share. Otherwise, discussion would be void. Formulated reversely, unity in the sense of uniformity, unanimity or sameness, threatens the world's commonality. Human beings both rely upon each other because they share a world, and appear as unique individuals when they move about the public sphere. This paradox implies that what renders people as citizens unique and distinct individuals, is not opposed to what they have in common. It is opposed, though, to isolation, loneliness and confinement to the private sphere. Uniqueness and individuality do not refer to the private sphere, to personal or collective identity for example, but are effects or epiphenomena of public performance and interaction. Commonality is not concerned with a property, or set of properties, that human beings share naturally, for example a human nature or essence, that is, with what renders them similar or the same, but with the world they share. Commonality is not simply a given, but should be brought about and maintained through interaction in public space. It is the world we have in common and which at the same time enables the distinctions between us. Only by performing and interacting in the common, public world, do citizens obtain uniqueness. The diversity among individuals as citizens is much more extensive than the diversity among groups based upon collective identities like 'peoples, nations and ethnicities'¹⁶⁰, simply because there are more individuals than groups to which individuals belong. Only when it is the subject of a variety of perspectives does

¹⁵⁷ Arendt, 1977, 'Public rights and private interests', 105.

¹⁵⁸ See the qualifications about the non-worldly nature of the family at the beginning of this section.

¹⁵⁹ Blättler, 2001.

¹⁶⁰ WiP, 12.

the world obtain its character of commonality. Or put reversely, unity, oneness, unanimity, uniformity and sameness threaten the world's commonality. Consequentially, commonality is not opposed to differences, but on the contrary, crucially dependent upon them. For Arendt, the individual and community, in the sense of the common world, are not opposed. Political, that is, non-given, non-natural, non-homogenous and pluralistic community only emerges when individuals as citizens display their plurality of perspectives and opinions (*δόξαι*) in public space. Its aim is not to achieve consensus, harmony or another form of unity by homogenizing differences, as is the case in traditional conceptions of community, but instead to play out or do justice to the multiplicity and diversity of individual perspectives. As a result, a common world comes into being. In Arendt's view, community is never given, but an artifact that citizens should actively shape and maintain.¹⁶¹

The paradox of difference and commonality implies the paradox of solitude and being-together. Arendt held that that people need both temporary solitude, and a shared worldly space or being-together or commonality. Solitude turns into the pathological condition of isolation, when people become distinct without being together. Being-together turns into fusion, the fusion of plural men into single Man, when people are together without being distinct. So the reverse of the paradox of solitude and being-together is the paradox van isolation and fusion.¹⁶²

The paradox of difference and commonality gives rise to a final paradox, which is, as it were, its more explicit political translation, the paradox of communication and conflict, or, in other words, the paradox of interaction and agonism, or intersubjectivity and individuality. Political action and speech have both an individuating or agonistic and an intersubjective or associationist dimension. Action only takes place where people act in concert in a common world, but simultaneously show who they are, as unique individuals. The individuating aspect of action may be called performance, the intersubjective dimension association, communication or participation. The opposition between the two which is often presupposed in the Arendt-scholarship is a false one, while communication and conflict in fact presuppose one another.

Communication inherently presupposes different beings and the possibility of something between them; it points to both separateness and relatedness. If we automatically coincided, formed a not-very-differentiated whole, we would not need to speak or listen or argue, nor would we if we were doomed to non-communication, to sheer unbending differences. Communication is an effort that acknowledges a

¹⁶¹ See Part II, especially chapter 3.

¹⁶² I will explain this in more detail in Part II.

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more-than-one, a separateness, a difference that may be the source of conflict, and at the same time foregrounds the possibility of bridging that gap by devising a means of relatedness.¹⁶³

The paradoxes imply that plurality and worldliness are mutually conditional or presuppose each other. They are, in other words, co-original. This becomes manifest in particular when plurality is destroyed, in the experience of isolation and superfluosity.¹⁶⁴ Plurality is a condition of human existence, because human existence is lived within the world. This argument may also be reversed. Human existence is worldly, because it is plural. It is decisive that the world only exists by the grace of the many, multiple perspectives of its citizens. Had people not been interdependent upon each other, on an anthropological level and not just for their material survival, that is, had they been self-sufficient, they would not have shared a world. Had citizens not radically differed as regards their views of the world, the latter would have become uniform and gradually wither away. And vice versa, if people would not share a world, they would have been deprived of the possibility of speech and action in public and hence of the possibility of obtaining both equality and individuality among each other.

Since Arendt holds that plurality and the world are mutually conditional, a loss of plurality at the same time implies a loss of world, and vice versa. When people get radically isolated over and against each other, plurality is lost and they fall prey to the experience of radical isolation. Loss of world, world-alienation and worldlessness cause a loss of plurality, and, as a consequence, at the same time a loss of equality, commonality, meaningfulness and sense of reality.

The inter-esse, the space of appearances and the web of relationships

In the previous sections, I introduced the phenomenological distinctions between nature, the material world and the intersubjective world. In Part II and III, I will elaborate the various dimensions of the intersubjective world, which, as we have seen, is the non-substantial, that is, relational, dynamic and fragile, space of meanings and stories. The intersubjective world comes about whenever people relate to each other through words and deeds and ceases to exist when people no longer relate to each other. It concerns the *res publica*, that which is of concern to everyone, as distinguished from one's private affairs. In the current section, I will briefly introduce the various aspects or dimensions of the intersubjective world in Arendt's own terms, respectively the *inter-esse*, the space of appearances and the web of relationships. Finally, I will cluster these notions in two

¹⁶³ Bickford, 1996, 4-5.

¹⁶⁴ OT, 474-78. On isolation and superfluosity, see § 1.

dimensions, a phenomenal, i.e. public and visible, and a communal dimension, which I will address in part II and III respectively.

Of all of Arendt's conceptualizations of the world, we probably find the 'in-between', *inter (homines) esse*, most frequently throughout her work, both as a description of the material and of the intersubjective world, because it is phenomenologically most basic and fundamental. The world is something which 'lies between human beings'¹⁶⁵, it constitutes 'interspaces between men in all their variety'¹⁶⁶, is a 'unique intermediary space'¹⁶⁷ or 'the thing that arises between people and in which everything that individuals carry with them innately can become visible and audible'¹⁶⁸, etc. The intermediary quality of the world implies, first, that it is outside of people. 'It is the space between them that unites them, rather than some quality inside each of them'.¹⁶⁹ Second, it is paradoxically both a meeting-place, which provides for relation and engagement between people, and a buffer or medium between people, which provides for distance between them.¹⁷⁰ The world does not coincide with the people inhabiting it. On the contrary, it is the 'impersonal' or 'anonymous' point of reference.¹⁷¹ The point, is, first, that it shift the political centre of gravity from the self to the artificial sphere where plural people meet, from to the inner to the outer world, or from Man, taken as an essentialist conception of a human nature, to men, and from concern with the life process, production and reproduction to concern with the *res publica*, the public cause and its concomitant value of public freedom. Arendt attempts to shift the focus from the private to the public realm and from those experiences I can have in isolation, when I am completely on my own or with my beloved ones, to those experiences which I can, as a principle, impossibly have unless among others. Arendt puts the implications of this argument quite astutely: '[T]he world and the people who inhabit it are not the same'¹⁷². '[M]an is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*.' It is 'established as relationships.'¹⁷³

[T]he world and the catastrophes that occur in it should [not] be regarded as purely human occurrence, much less that they should be reduced to something that happens to *man* or to the nature of man. For the world and the things of this world, in the midst of which human affairs take place, are not the expression of human

¹⁶⁵ MDT, 4.

¹⁶⁶ MDT, 31.

¹⁶⁷ IP, 95.

¹⁶⁸ MDT, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Canovan, 1985, 68. Cf. OR, 227.

¹⁷⁰ For this reason, I will speak of a fundamental paradox of distance and engagement in the Conclusion.

¹⁷¹ Kirsch, 2009.

¹⁷² MDT, 4.

¹⁷³ IP, 95; WiP, 11.

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nature, that is, the imprint of human nature turned outward, but, on the contrary, are the result of the fact that human beings produce what they themselves are not - that is – things – and that even the so-called psychological or intellectual realms become permanent realities in which people can live and move only to the extent that these realms are present as things, as a world of things. It is within this world of things that human beings act and are themselves conditioned, and because they are conditioned by it, every catastrophe that occurs within it strikes back at them, affects them.¹⁷⁴

Second, respecting the *inter-est* appeals as much to being-together as to keeping distance. It implies both alliance and separation. The much-cited image of the table, which is more than just a metaphor because of Arendt's heavy emphasis upon the thing-character of the world, is instructive here. The world is something which simultaneously relates the people who sit around it and separates them. 'The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak.'¹⁷⁵ The table represents the world in that it is a topic of discussion, which everyone inevitably regards from a different perspective. No two persons gathering around it will ever see the same table, though all different perspectives relate to one, i.e. this particular, table. Besides, the table, not the people, is central. Compassion and love, on the contrary, do not require argumentative speech 'in which someone talks *to* somebody *about* something that is of interest to both'¹⁷⁶, and for this very reason are politically irrelevant or even dangerous.¹⁷⁷ 'Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence.'¹⁷⁸ The world is a meeting place and a medium or intermediary at once. It prevents human relationships from fusion by putting a 'third' in their midst which creates a certain distance in which plurality can flourish. Only when it is the point of reference of a plurality of perspectives does the world obtain the feature of commonality, I argued previously. As such, it corresponds to the paradox of commonality and difference.

[C]onsent' (...) constitutes *inter-est*, that which is between men, ranging all the way from material and spiritual and other matters. This 'between' can be a common ground and it can be a common purpose; it always fulfills the double function of binding men together and separating them in an articulate way.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁴ IP, 106-07; WiP, 24-25.

¹⁷⁵ HC, 52.

¹⁷⁶ 'The social question', OR, 86.

¹⁷⁷ Reversely, compassion and love are destroyed when relying exclusively on arguments.

¹⁷⁸ OR, 86.

¹⁷⁹ 'A reply', EU, 406.

Like in the description of the world as the *inter-esse*, interaction and intersubjectivity are stressed in another one of Arendt's favorite descriptions, the web of relationships. This web refers to the fact that we are embedded in a network of human relationships, consisting in the stories, opinions, discussions, etc. that people bring about when acting and speaking.¹⁸⁰ With the metaphor of the web, Arendt underscores the intangible, fragile and ephemeral quality of the human world. Since nobody's existence, not even the hermit's, is ever absolutely and permanently solitary, actions and words are inserted in existing networks of meanings and relationships. As a consequence, words and deeds end up in stories, but are also interpreted in ways which may not reflect the person's motives and aims. Therefore, the network of relationships is in permanent need of being sustained by acting and speaking people, who thus make it more substantial and solid.

Finally, Arendt describes the world as the space of appearances or space of display.¹⁸¹ This is probably the most encompassing of all descriptions of the world. In an interview, she asserted that the world is broader than the space of politics. It is 'der Raum, in dem Dinge öffentlich werden, als Raum, in dem man wohnt und der anständig aussehen muß. In dem natürlich auch Kunst erscheint. In dem alles Mögliche erscheint.'¹⁸² This notion follows from her phenomenological approach of politics, which foregrounds appearance.¹⁸³ The world is strictly phenomenal, that is, visible to all and hence public.¹⁸⁴ The world as the space of appearances is the locus where individuals appear vis-à-vis others, i.e. where they perform deeds and are seen, where they articulate opinions, judgments and stories and are heard. It is 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me.'¹⁸⁵ Words and deeds do not precede this space, but constitute it the moment they are performed and spoken as well as perceived by others: 'The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action'.¹⁸⁶ Notice that this implies that there is no essentialist distinction between the private and the public sphere in Arendt's work, for in some conditions - think for example of dissidents under totalitarian governments - even a living room can constitute a public space. Provided that people act and speak together, any place can be a public space. Note that I reject the current one-sided association of the world's character of appearance in Arendt's work with the postmodernist notion of

¹⁸⁰ HC, §25 ("The web of relationships and the enacted stories"), 181-88.

¹⁸¹ IP, 140.

¹⁸² ZP, 67.

¹⁸³ See §2 of this chapter.

¹⁸⁴ LOM I, 19.

¹⁸⁵ HC, 198-99.

¹⁸⁶ HC, 199.

performativity. Appearance, indeed, also requires one's performance appear to others, whereas this intersubjective element is frequently downplayed by adherents of agonism.¹⁸⁷

The most general qualities of the intersubjective world which connect its various shapes, namely the space of appearances, the web of relationships and the *inter-esse*, I would suggest, are, on the one hand, its phenomenal or public quality, that is, its nature of appearance, publicity and visibility; and, on the other hand, its communal dimension. It is both a public space and a common world. The emphasis shifts dependent upon the context. As the space of appearances, the phenomenal nature of the world is stressed, as the web of relationships its communal dimension, while the *inter-esse* joins both dimensions in equal proportions. Public space is a common world as a matter of fact. The world is public since it contains 'everything that appears in public'¹⁸⁸ and because it is common to all its inhabitants.¹⁸⁹ Since the world is visible to all, it is a common world. The common world, vice versa, is also public as a matter of course.

[T]he common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike. (...) But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public.¹⁹⁰

In Part II, I will address the communal dimension of the world, in Part III its phenomenal or public quality.

Conclusion Part I: Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology and the traditions of metaphysics, scientism and postmodernism

In the Introduction and Part I, I have tried to reconstruct Arendt's implicit but strong debt to the spirit of the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition and her original extension of this tradition to include a phenomenological analysis of political phenomena. One of the aims of Part I has been to clarify the critical position of Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology of the political vis-à-vis a number of methodological, epistemological, scientific and conceptual frameworks and intellectual traditions: metaphysics, strong empiricism and scientism, and postmodernism. As a conclusion, I will briefly summarize Arendt's position with respect to these traditions.

¹⁸⁷ For example Honig.

¹⁸⁸ HC, 45.

¹⁸⁹ HC, 52: 'Second, the term 'public' signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.'

¹⁹⁰ HC, 55.

Through a hermeneutic phenomenology of the political and a phenomenological anthropology of the human conditions, Arendt deconstructs the metaphysical legacy, which persistently plagues both political philosophy and scientism on a methodological level and with respect to their presuppositions concerning the self or Man. From Arendt's perspective, the problems with which the metaphysical tradition struggles are manifold, including dualism, essentialism, reductionism and determinism. As a phenomenologist she rejects the essentialism or naturalism inherent in the very quest for human nature, i.e. the aspiration to discover, define and determine a definite and universal human essence, for example as *animal rationale* or *homo economicus*. Instead, as a phenomenologist, she regards humans as situated beings. Moreover, she adds to human situatedness the human condition of plurality. 'Man' is in her view an unacceptable objectification, abstraction or generalization of the human plurality. A definition of human nature reduces persons to what they are, i.e. subjects, selves or specimens of Man, at the expense of who they are. Such definitions ignore human plurality, the manifold different and historically variable views that concrete, situated men-in-the-plural take on reality. Arendt's celebration of plurality and worldliness also implies a criticism of the substance of the traditional definitions of human nature, most notably their insistence on rationality or compassion and sovereignty. Rather, she stresses the worldliness and intersubjectivity of human existence. Moreover, definitions of the constants of human nature are deterministic for ignoring the contingency of human existence and human action and hence undermine the possibility of human freedom. Epistemologically, the metaphysical dislike of contingency translates in the tendency to ignore the contingency of factual truths and to replace it by coercive logical truths.

Furthermore, phenomenologists are critical of the so-called subject-object dualism that is presupposed in the metaphysical tradition. This dualism entails the separation and opposition of, on the one hand, a subject, perceiver or self, and, on the other hand, an object or perceived, i.e. world and nature, including one's own body, other human beings, etc. Moreover, more often than not, this dualistic way of thinking ends up in reductionism as well, since human beings are overwhelmingly reduced to the subject-side of this dualism, i.e. consciousness or mind. In Arendt's view, men are both natural and worldly beings: there is no dualism between 'consciousness' and 'nature' running through human beings. For example, birth and death are not 'simply natural occurrences', but also worldly events, that is, they are endowed with meaning in relation to the intersubjectively shared world.

[B]irth and death (...) are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart. [They] presuppose a world which is not in constant movement, but whose durability

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and relative permanence make appearance and disappearance possible, which existed before any one individual appeared into it and will survive his eventual departure.¹⁹¹

As a hermeneutic-phenomenologist, Arendt deconstructs the dualism of subject and object and posits an alternative conception that avoids its pitfalls. The insistence on the worldliness of human existence, i.e. its embeddedness in the world, is key to this alternative.¹⁹² Phenomenology concerns the descriptive analysis of phenomena, that is, of the way things and events appear to us in lived experience. This means that phenomenologists always take a relational, and in Arendt's case also a perspectival, point of view with respect to the things they study. Things and events are not seen in isolation, as entities or realities external to us, but as phenomena that appear to us. Subject and object are never separate entities, phenomenologists hold, but should always be regarded in their relationship to each other. The subject-object dualism has both an existential-anthropological and a methodological-epistemological dimension. The existential-anthropological dimension concerns the assimilation of human beings to things, i.e. substances, as a consequence of which they are considered subjects that are enclosed in themselves. This assimilation therefore implies, in Arendt's vocabulary, the reduction of human beings to what they are. How, phenomenologists ask, could such a self-enclosed being possibly relate to and interact with something or someone else, without the aid of a lever?¹⁹³ The classical problem of the relation between mind, consciousness or *res cogitans* (Descartes) on the one hand, and body or *res extensa* on the other hand, is the best-known example of this anthropological problem. In the metaphysics of the subject, world and nature are identified with necessity and being determined by laws of nature. This is what Kant calls *das Reich der Notwendigkeit*. The self, on the other hand, is associated with freedom and determining, *das Reich der Freiheit*. Phenomenologists, on the contrary, show that the subject-object dualism is nothing but an anthropological misunderstanding, since we are situated, worldly beings. For example, Arendt's phenomenological conception of the person as a showing-but-slippery who, is an alternative to the reduction of people to what they are.

The methodological side of the subject-object dualism is manifest in the representation of the position of the perceiver or epistemological subject, including the scholar, as an external observer over and against the perceived or the epistemological object, i.e. the world. This representation is key to the Archimedian ideal of objectively

¹⁹¹ HC, 96-97.

¹⁹² Since they reject the subject-object dualism, phenomenologists avoid the term subject and often introduce other terms, such as *Dasein* (Heidegger).

¹⁹³ Krüger, 2007, calls this 'das anthropologische Integrationsproblem' (614).

valid knowledge.¹⁹⁴ Again, phenomenologists raise the question how such an external observer is ever to obtain knowledge of the world, its own body and others if it is radically separated from the latter.

Arendt suggests the narrative method of understanding of the scholar-as-spectator as an alternative.¹⁹⁵ The perspective we as perceivers take upon phenomena is central to the phenomenologist's attention. They focus on understanding from a second-person perspective as a methodic entrance to the topics they investigate. Thus, they avoid the metaphysical problem of the subject-object dualism. This is nicely expressed in the famous phenomenological motto *Zu den Sachen selbst!* and the appeal to saving the appearances, that is, to the things as they appear to us.

Scientism and its epistemological assumption, strong empiricism, is as essentialist, dualist and determinist as metaphysics. It is essentialist to the extent that it tries to catch the nature of human being in one definition, for example *homo sapiens* or *homo economicus*. It is determinist, because of the tendency to construct causal regularities in the variability of events and phenomena. Consequentially, it reduces the new to the already existing and denies the experience of freedom. It is dualist to the extent that it adopts the Archimedian ideal of objectivity and the corresponding view of the scholar-as-observer taking an external perspective on the objects of study. Additionally, strong empiricists presuppose uncritical conceptions of both experience and factuality. They disregard that we select facts. Likewise, their assumption that we can have direct, immediate access to reality overlooks the requirement of interpretation. As a hermeneutic phenomenologist, Arendt holds that incidents, facts and events are not immediately clear to us. Experiences require interpretation in order to say something at all, that is, to convince or disclose their explicit meaning.¹⁹⁶

Postmodernist thinkers have recently shown great interest in Arendt's work. However, though they certainly share a number of concerns, the postmodern appropriation of Arendt's work is misguided in my view for ignoring her hermeneutic-phenomenological approach of the political. Postmodernists, I argued, are driven by radical skepticism with respect to their non-foundationalism, that is, their affirmation of the contingency and ultimate groundlessness of judging, action and with respect to their rejection of any claim to the universal validity of truth. Arendt, however, stressed the contingency of action and the groundlessness of judgment for quite another, that is, hermeneutic-phenomenological, reason. She thought of understanding as situated, not because she was a relativist, but because she thought understanding is engaged in a

¹⁹⁴ See chapter 1, §4.

¹⁹⁵ See chapter 1, §4.

¹⁹⁶ Arendt, 1962, 'Action and 'the pursuit of happiness''; UP, 320-21.

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hermeneutic circle, which implies that all proper, reflective understanding arises from the unreflective preliminary understanding of the world we always already have because of our practical engagements with it. There is no place outside our preliminary understanding from which we can build up understanding.

Likewise, Arendt denied that political and moral judgments can be justified by reference to universal and objective validity, let alone are concerned with the establishment of truth, not because she was a skeptic doubting any basis of truth, but because she held the hermeneutic-phenomenological conviction that judgment and understanding as politically relevant faculties are concerned with meaning, which is plural, contingent and variable as a matter of course, rather than with truth, which is by nature singular and coercive and hence unfit for the political realm of human affairs. Metaphysicians tend to conflate meaning and truth. Political and moral judgment is never objectively valid and cannot attain objective validity because it lacks a cognitive foundation, like logical or mathematical truths - $1+1=2$, for example - and factual data, such as that I was born on August 6th, 1974. This is not because Arendt as a postmodernist, non-foundational skeptic *avant la lettre* throws into doubt any foundations, but because she is a hermeneutic phenomenologist. The distinction between truth and meaning is crucial here. Judgment, in Arendt's view, is concerned with understanding, and hence with meaning, instead of knowing and hence with truth. Whereas truth is compelling, meaning is not, because assertions concerning meaning are intersubjective, open to debate and open-ended as a matter of course. This also means that meaning is contingent and expresses human freedom.

Next, their epistemological skepticism leads postmodernists to a wholesale rejection of the meaning of experience, of facts and of the ideal of impartiality.¹⁹⁷ If experiences, facts and impartiality are considered merely ideological scientific constructions, any criterion for making normative distinctions is lost, for example between sound and unsound judgments and opinions. For this reason, Arendt, on the contrary, never rejected impartiality completely, but set about rethinking impartiality as situated.

Also, like postmodernists, Arendt rejected the idea of a human nature and believed in the historical variability of particular constellations of human conditions, but she also held that these conditions provide particular constants.

Finally, though Arendt's notions of plurality, action and public space certainly involve an agonistic or performative view of politics, the agonistic moment, in her view, presupposes a communicative or associationist moment. Conflict and communication, indeed, constitute a paradox.

¹⁹⁷ See chapter 1.

