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Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world

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Chapter 4

Common sense

Much of what Arendt has to say about the common world is asserted in the context of accounting for common sense. I provisionally define common sense as a ‘common feeling for the world’¹. Indeed, Arendt once called common sense *Weltsinn*.² To her, common sense is the principal political quality and the ‘political sense *par excellence*’.³ What is at stake is expressed very clearly in the following statement Arendt made in an interview about the faculties that the statesman needs.

Der Staatsmann wird umgeben, eingekreist, von einem Heer von Experten. (...) Der Staatsmann muß ja schließlich die Entscheidung treffen. Er kann sie sachgemäß ja kaum treffen. Er kann ja all das gar nicht wissen. Er muß es nehmen von Experten und zwar von Experten, die sich prinzipiell immer widersprechen müssen. (...) Jeder vernünftige Staatsmann holt sich die entgegengesetzten Expertisen ein. Denn er muß die Sache ja von allen Seiten sehen. (...) Dazwischen muß er urteilen. Und dieses Urteilen ist ein höchst mysteriöser Vorgang. In dem äußert sich dann der Gemeinsinn.⁴

This applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to any acting citizen as well.

Arendt has been interested in common sense ever since *The origins of totalitarianism*. This book provides a tentative response to the question the loss of which faculty turns people away from the common world, and, conversely, the restoration of which prepares them for worldly existence, and how this process works. Since, she reflected upon it in chapter VI of *The human condition* about the typically modern loss of world, *The life of the mind I*, in several essays in the course of her work⁵ and in her lectures on Kant’s political philosophy. No doubt, the last have attracted most scholarly attention. Arendt’s concept of

¹ Villa, 1996, 105.

² Arendt, ‘Kultur und Politik’, 1958, 1142.

³ HC, 208-09; UP, 318.

⁴ ZP, 68-69.

⁵ Especially in ‘The crisis in culture’, BPF; ‘On humanity in dark times’, MDT; and in several previously unpublished lectures, most notably ‘Philosophy and politics’, 1990 [1954] and UP.

common sense is usually studied in the context of her unfinished account of judgment and hence in relation to political judging. The fact that it was first raised in the context of her analysis of totalitarian ideology has been largely ignored in scholarship on Arendt's theories of judgment and action.⁶

In *The origins of totalitarianism*, common sense is related to our sense of the real, and its operation is opposed to totalitarian ideological thinking. On the one hand, the advance of totalitarian ideology benefits from a previous degradation of common sense, as a consequence of which people can no longer tell fact from fiction. Hence, Arendt writes that 'the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or convinced Communist but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (that is, the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (that is, the standards of thought) no longer exist.'⁷ On the other hand, when totalitarianism rises to power, it destroys the remains of common sense by displacing it by ideological supersense. Totalitarian ideologies, Arendt writes, specialize in creating entirely fictitious worlds, especially by means of propaganda. Out of contempt for experience, reality and factuality, they produce a 'lying world of consistency'⁸ contrary to common sense. Internally they are completely coherent and meaningful; externally, however, they are shut off from the real world and devoid of any meaning, hence 'no-sense'⁹, i.e. nonsense. 'Over and above the senselessness of totalitarian society is enthroned the ridiculous supersense of its ideological superstition.'¹⁰ By deactivating their sensory relation to the factual world, whence 'everything is possible', totalitarian movements provide the superfluous and lonely masses, robbed of status and common sense, with a home, even if it is a completely imaginary and illusory one.¹¹

The present chapter deals with the relation between common sense and the common world. This question refers to one of the most hotly debated issues in present-day Arendt scholarship, namely the status of common sense or *sensus communis* in Arendt's theory of judgment. The question which is raised is: is common sense *a priori* or *a posteriori*, i.e. empirical? That is, is the common sense that makes judgment possible, based in a universally shared transcendental faculty or capacity, or, on the other hand, in a shared concrete community? Is common sense a given capacity or a socio-cultural achievement, acquired through experience and socialization in the particular community one happens to

⁶ Cf. Norris, 1996, 174-75, n. 27.

⁷ OT, 474.

⁸ OT, 353.

⁹ OT, 458.

¹⁰ OT, 457.

¹¹ OT, 343, 457-58, 470, 475, 477; cf. Canovan, 1992, 53, 55, 56.

be born into? Scholarly debates on this issue focus on the relationship between Arendt's notion of common sense and Kant's a priori, transcendental notion of *sensus communis* that he elaborates in his theory of aesthetic judgment.¹² There is by now a huge body of literature studying this relationship by drawing upon the posthumously published notes of Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* (1982).¹³ It has become a custom to read these notes as containing *in nuce* Arendt's thought on common sense and judging, even up to the point that it is by now simply considered as the informal third part (*Judging*) of the planned trilogy *The life of the mind*. Issues that are examined include: does Arendt do justice to Kant's critique of judgment, probably revealing implications he did not see himself? Is she a faithful daughter? Is her reading of Kant valid, or did she, deliberately or not, misread it? Or did she simply appropriate his thought for her own purposes, and in the process draw conclusions which are invalid with respect to Kant's text? For example: does she bring about an empirical or sociological turn with respect to the crucial Kantian distinction between the transcendental principle of universal communicability and empirical communication in a particular community? This would challenge the universal validity of judgment and imply a turn, or a toning down according to her critics hold, to a more modest, situated validity.

What is at stake in this debate seems to be no less than the promise or 'the methodological treasure' inherent in the concept of *sensus communis*, namely the reconciliation of a commitment to the situatedness of understanding and judgment with the universalistic aspiration to transcend mere partiality, subjectivism or arbitrariness.¹⁴ It is widely felt that the Kantian universalistic approach of common sense, that is, the 'shared capacity to feel what may be universally shared'¹⁵, is no longer tenable. As an a priori faculty, it supposedly grounds the universal communicability of our reflective judgments and presupposes a 'spontaneous agreement of our perceptual apparatus, supposedly the same for every human being, and the object being perceived through it'.¹⁶ On the other hand, however, approaches that make common sense solely dependent upon empirical communities, are considered equally undesirable because of 'the inevitable relativism ensuing from a plurality of equally unquestionable traditions, horizons and life-worlds'.¹⁷

¹² Beiner, 1982; Tassin, 1987; Norris, 1996; Yar, 2000; Vandeputte, 2008; Degryse, 2009; Peeters, 2009

¹³ For example: Bernstein, 1996; Beiner, 1982, 1992; Benhabib, 1988; Steinberger, 1990; Biskowski, 1993; Clarke, 1994; Norris, 1996; Ferrara, 2008a and 2008b; Yar, 2000; Lara, 2008, etc. Also see the special issue on judgment of *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 34 (2008), No.1-2.

¹⁴ Ferrara, 2008a, 6-7.

¹⁵ Ferrara, 2008a, 12.

¹⁶ Ferrara, 2008a, 13.

¹⁷ Ferrara, 2008a, 12; cf. 2008b.

I will elucidate my intervention in this debate in the second half of this chapter. For now, it suffices to assert that Arendt is neither a transcendental philosopher, nor an empiricist, but a hermeneutic phenomenologist. I will explicate the two most significant implications for the aforementioned debate. First, Arendt's own ideas about judgment and common sense may be inspired by Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment, but they are in no way Kantian, i.e. transcendental. Therefore, it is advisable to read *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* not as offering anything more than a course on Kant's work. A scrupulous reading at least reveals that it is unclear when Arendt is expressing her own views, and when she is illuminating Kant's thought. Therefore, scholars should be very careful and reluctant to attribute the contentions on *sensus communis* or common sense¹⁸ in the *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* to Arendt herself, if these are not supported by her published work. For this reason, I will refer to the *Lectures* in the present chapter only if it is in agreement with previous writings in which Arendt addresses common sense.¹⁹ Finally, Kant's critique of judgment is not the only philosophical resource for Arendt in reflecting on common sense. Another one is Aristotle's account of φρόνησις, practical wisdom or prudence in *Ethica Nicomachea* book VI.²⁰ He describes φρόνησις as the typical politician's and citizen's virtue of 'judging insight'; as distinguished from σοφία, the 'intellectual wisdom' of the philosopher.²¹ In contradistinction to σοφία, which is oriented towards universal truths, φρόνησις deals with particulars and how to act in particular situations. This is not a question of applying universal rules to particular situations. Judgment resists the mechanical application of recipes because of the unpredictable variations and complexities of the human affairs. Therefore, φρόνησις appeals to experience of the world rather than to learning and applying universal rules. Whereas σοφία shuns discussion, φρόνησις crucially involves deliberation.

Whereas young people become accomplished in geometry and mathematics, and wise within these limits, prudent young people do not seem to be found. The reason is that prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it.²²

For this reason, φρόνησις is not only distinguished from σοφία but also from τέχνη, skill or craftsmanship. Τέχνη only concerns the ability to achieve given ends or goals, i.e.

¹⁸ Arendt discusses common sense and *sensus communis* in LKPP, 64, 67, 70-71, 75.

¹⁹ Such as HC, LOM I, §8 and §10 and the essays 'The crisis in culture', BPF; 'Truth and politics', BPF; UP.

²⁰ 'The crisis in culture', BPF, 221; cf. Beiner, 1982, 104, 134-35.

²¹ Aristotle distinguishes between five virtues of thought: φρόνησις, σοφία, τέχνη, ἐπιστήμη and νούς

²² Aristotle, 1976 [350 BC], 1142a.

instrumental or teleological reason; φρόνησις, however, includes determining the ends themselves also.²³ It is indeed not hard to see why Arendt is interested in φρόνησις. Unlike the philosopher's wisdom, political insight or φρόνησις is not concerned with the insights of *Verstand* but with the judgments of action, and unlike the craftsman's skill, τέχνη, it takes the contingency and particularities of human affairs into account.²⁴

Second, and most importantly, the fact Arendt analyzes judgment and common sense in a phenomenological fashion, implies that the very question whether her concept of common sense is a priori or empirical is not pertinent. Once again, the neglect of Arendt's phenomenological background has caused much confusion and misunderstandings.

Before going into the details of this debate, I will explicate the broad outlines of Arendt's analysis of the operation and effects of common sense in the first part of this chapter. Arendt never offered an unequivocal account of common sense. She sometimes suggests the terms 'common sense' ('sound human reason', *gesunder Menschenverstand*, *le bon sens*) and *sensus communis* ('community sense', *Gemeinsinn*) refer to different phenomena or faculties.²⁵ However, she never explains what exactly this difference pertains to and most of the she time does not make a distinction at all, simply calling it 'common sense', and uses the two notions interchangeably.²⁶ Since her description of both common sense and *sensus communis* is strikingly unambiguous - a sixth sense which is somehow related to common world, and opposed to privacy and private sense²⁷ - I simply assume that both have the same referent.

1. Experience and the sense of the real

The substance of common sense is our daily experience of reality, i.e. of worldly appearances. Remember that Arendt's is a phenomenological, not an empiricist notion of experience. For phenomenologists, lived experience refers to how we, human beings, live our lives, are involved in projects and interact with each other. Far removed from the sense

²³ See for example Beiner, 1982. Aristotle scholars do not completely agree upon this however. Some argue that in the case of φρόνησις, the end is given as well, namely εὐδαιμονία.

²⁴ Cf. Beiner, 1983.

²⁵ HC, 283 (incl. n.44), 284; LKPP, 70, 71, 72.

²⁶ For example: 'On humanity in dark times', MDT, 28. (In the German original version of this essay: 'Gemeinsinn oder gesundes Menschenverstand', Arendt, 1989, 'Gedanken zu Lessing. Von der Menschlichkeit in finsternen Zeiten', 28), 'Crisis in Education', BPF, 178.

²⁷ For example UP, 318; 'Philosophy and politics', 1990 [1954], 100; HC, 208-09; 'The crisis in education', BPF, 178; 'The conquest of space', BPF, 266; LOM I, 59; LKPP, 64.

data of empiricists, lived experience is inherently meaningful.²⁸ The presence of others is prerequisite for our sense of reality and perception.²⁹ It is so by virtue of our common sense, ‘our mental organ for perceiving, understanding and dealing with reality and factuality’.³⁰ Common sense enables experience; and reversely, when common sense is destroyed, we lose the capacity for experience.³¹ ‘[R]eality is not guaranteed by the ‘common nature’ of all men who constitute it’³² but it is the effect of common sense, ‘der Sinn durch den wir Wirklichkeit *qua* Wirkliches erfassen’³³. This sense of reality or realness is the ‘sensorily perceptible property of the world’ that corresponds to common sense, like the visibility of the world corresponds to vision, for the world is visible for human beings and many other animals because they have vision.³⁴ ‘[A] feeling of realness (or irreality) actually accompanies all the sensations of my senses, which without it would not make ‘sense’.’³⁵

In the context of realness, Arendt consistently compares common sense to a sixth sense which she describes as ‘the one by which all other senses, with their intimately private sensations, are fitted into the common world’³⁶. It is certainly no coincidence that she uses the notion ‘sense’ here, for as a phenomenologist she is adamant that our perception of reality, our susceptibility to appearances, rather than ideas, or some innate human substance, for example, plays a crucial role in the disclosure and constitution of the common world. Experience in the hermeneutic- phenomenological sense, as opposed to a strong empiricist one, always concerns the relation between a perceiver and the perceived. The one does not exist without the other. For this reason, it is wrong to explain things only in terms of subjective capacities, such as ideas or cognition, but equally wrong to reduce them to objective qualities. Common sense, on the other hand, refers to the kind of objectivity human beings are capable of, i.e. a common intersubjectively validated reality. ‘In a world of appearances, filled with error and semblance, reality is guaranteed by [a] threefold commonness’, Arendt writes. Together, the three aspects of commonality produce the sense of reality. First, commonness is achieved on the intrasubjective level, by coordinating or aligning the five senses, that each in themselves are completely subjective

²⁸ See chapter 1 on Arendt’s notion of experience.

²⁹ See chapter 2; cf. Taminioux, 1997, 202-03.

³⁰ ‘On violence’, CR, 110.

³¹ OT, 474, 477.

³² HC, 57-58.

³³ DB, June 1958, 595.

³⁴ LOM I, 50.

³⁵ LOM I, 51.

³⁶ HC, 283.

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or private, ‘unreliable and treacherous’³⁷ and so are absolutely incommunicable.³⁸ In isolation, the data of the senses, for example sound and smell, cannot be translated into each other, so only the integration of the common sense ensures that they refer to the same matter. For example, the tree I hear rustling is the same as the tree I can touch, see and smell.³⁹

Second, commonness is achieved on a worldly, intersubjective level. Human beings, like other animals, for that matter, ‘have the context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning’ and that therefore guarantees that others ‘perceive as I do’⁴⁰. This commonness, as expressed in common names for things, for example ‘tree’, is ‘the decisive factor for intersubjective communication – the same object being perceived by different persons and common to them’.

The subjectivity of the it-seems-to-me is remedied by the fact that the same object also appears to others though its mode of appearance may be different. (It is the inter-subjectivity of the world, rather than similarity of physical appearance, that convinces men that they belong to the same species. Though each single object appears in a different perspective to each individual, the context in which it appears is the same for the whole species. In this sense, every animal species does not need to compare its own characteristics with those of its fellow-members in order to recognize them as such.)⁴¹

For example, for human beings a tree may have many different meanings, such as provision of timber, recreational space, poetic or religious meaning, etc., but its potential meanings have a common frame of reference: the human conditions and our physical and mental capacities, including the design of our sensorial apparatus. It cannot, for example, be a nesting place. For a bird, on the other hand, the same tree is not a source of timber, nor can it have a poetic meaning, I suppose.

Because of its intimate relation to experience, common sense is opposed to ideological thinking. Ideology is not interested in reality as it is experienced, Arendt argues, but imposes an idea, an absolute rational truth, onto history and nature and coerces reality to conform to its rules. As such, it substitutes for, or even completely rejects, reality and as such achieves an ‘emancipation from the reality that we perceive with our five senses’.⁴²

³⁷ OT, 477.

³⁸ LOM I, 50; OT, 477.

³⁹ LOM I, 50; 119; OT, 477; cf. DB, August 1958, fragment 4, 600.

⁴⁰ LOM I, 50.

⁴¹ LOM I, 50; cf. OT, 475-77.

⁴² OT, 470.

What is called reality is deductively, i.e. logically, derived from a given, postulated idea. This is what Arendt calls ‘supersense’ as opposed to common sense.⁴³

Additionally, because of its intersubjective nature, common sense is also opposed to logical thinking. Common sense coordinates private sensations so as to produce the perception of a single world. The utter subjectivity and partiality of these sensations are transformed into intersubjectivity, though without producing objective knowledge according to Archimedian yardsticks.⁴⁴ Absolute, that is, non-situated, objectivity is incompatible with the fundamental fact of plurality: ‘the nonsubjective element in the non-objective senses is intersubjectivity.’⁴⁵ For logical thought, i.e. the deduction of conclusions from premises, to arrive at valid statements, solitude is no hindrance at all. One does not need someone else, or someone else’s opinion, to validate one’s conclusions, for these follow necessarily from given premises as long as one applies the rules of logic correctly. These rules derive from the way our brain works, which is the same in all human beings who are in their right mind. Therefore, anyone sticking to these rules will necessarily arrive at exactly the same conclusion. Every other form of mental activity, such as thinking, judging and cognition, needs communication, i.e. *sensus communis*, for its very operation, for these mental activities pertain to worldly phenomena, such as human affairs, events, etc., that are as a principle extremely variable. Common sense, therefore, is opposed to the private sense or *sensus privatus* of logical reasoning. Unlike logical reason, common sense withers away without or outside of the company of others, i.e. my equals. This happens both in loneliness, as the pathological condition in which one is thrown back upon one’s private, partial and entirely subjective experience; and under the equally pathological condition in which ideological propaganda or scientific discourse seem to make communication on the many different perspective on the world obsolete.

Common sense is Arendt’s main weapon against the, typically modern, phenomenon of subjectivism, which is philosophically prepared, so to say, by Descartes and Hobbes. Common sense guarantees the world we perceive is not simply an illusion, either a fabrication of my own mind or a trick an evil genius, such as Descartes’ *malin génie*, is playing on me. However, it does so, not through providing a foundation in truth, a rock bottom of knowledge, but through intersubjectivity. Common sense does not elevate cognition to the sole reliable access to reality. It does not share the Cartesian doubt about reality, but entertains a matter-of-fact relation to reality - ‘there we are and no questions asked’⁴⁶ - and thus lets itself be corrected by facts. Common sense only turns to reflection, knowledge or

⁴³ OT, 457-58; 470-73; cf. chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁴⁴ See my discussion of the Archimedian ideal of objectivity in chapter 1.

⁴⁵ LKPP, 67.

⁴⁶ LOM I, 59.

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ideology when this matter-of-fact relation to reality is broken or disturbed by disrupting events. Nor does common sense share ideology's contempt for reality.⁴⁷ Thus, it avoids the traps of both subjectivism or solipsism, and the objectivism of strong empiricism or scientism.⁴⁸

Arendt asserts the phenomenological observation that though thinking may doubt reality, it is unable to falsify, nor, for that matter, prove, the feeling of realness which common sense produces.⁴⁹ It is not consciousness, *res cogitans* or reason, but common sense, which allows for our sense of reality.⁵⁰ 'It is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality and are not merely felt as irritations of our nerves or resistance sensations of our bodies'⁵¹, she argues, and she is obviously rebelling against Cartesian subjectivist or solipsist underpinnings of modern philosophy here. Common sense is therefore opposed to Cartesian and Hobbesian reason, which is an 'inner faculty without any world relationship', 'the playing of the mind with itself, which comes to pass when the mind is shut off from all 'reality' and 'senses' only itself'⁵². Descartes' major error, as he so vividly represented in his *Meditationes* (1641), is his attempt to establish the reality of the world, including both the outer world or *res extensa*, and the inner world of the self or *res cogitans*, through introspective methods, in the isolation of his study. 'Descartes' philosophy is haunted by two nightmares which in a sense became the nightmares of the whole modern age. (...) In the one, reality, the reality of the world as well as of human life, is doubted: if neither the senses, nor common sense nor reason can be trusted, then it may well be that all that we take for reality is only a dream.' Descartes second nightmare is a variation of the first: the fear that an evil spirit or *malin génie* manipulates us so that we 'will never be able to reach any truth, never be able to be certain of anything.'⁵³ That is, Descartes tried to find yardsticks for certain and true knowledge in the human mind. Hobbes' definition of reason as 'reckoning with consequences', according to Arendt testifies to a Cartesian ontology failing to integrate the faculty of common sense and to take into account the worldly condition of human beings.⁵⁴

Arendt's criticism of modern Cartesian metaphysics extends to a much broader criticism of modernity, which she grasps under the heading of world alienation and the

⁴⁷ OT, 458.

⁴⁸ Cf. Villa, 1992, 296-97.

⁴⁹ LOM I, 49, 52.

⁵⁰ LOM I, 19-20.

⁵¹ HC, 208-09.

⁵² HC, 284.

⁵³ HC, 277.

⁵⁴ HC, 284; LOM I; Arendt, 1990, 'Philosophy and politics', 1990 [1954], 80. Cf. Norris, 1996, 173; Canovan, 1992, 151.

‘flight into the self’⁵⁵. She suggests that the theories of 17th century philosophers foreshadow a more general ‘subjectification of the real’⁵⁶ and withering away of common sense: ‘We live today in a world in which not even common sense makes sense any longer’⁵⁷. As a consequence, we are witness to the emergence of lonely mass man, the type of person susceptible to ideological manipulation.⁵⁸ Remember that common sense may be destroyed, and along with it the common world. Common sense is lost both in totalitarian societies and in modern mass society, a type of society in which men are reduced to *animal laborans* and *homo faber*. ‘The disappearance of common sense in the present day is the surest sign of the present-day crisis. In every crisis a piece of the world, something common to us all, is destroyed. The failure of common sense, like a divining rod, points to the place where such a cave-in has occurred.’⁵⁹ Arendt describes this alienation as ‘the atrophy of the space of appearances and the withering of common sense’⁶⁰.

[T]he loss of the world (...) has left behind it a society of men who, without a common world, which would at once relate and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass. For a mass-society is nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who are still related to one another but have lost the world once common to all of them.⁶¹

Common sense establishes our sense of reality, in other words, the sense of sharing a world. The world is not just there; it is common world as well. For this reason Arendt sometimes applies the more technical-philosophical term *sensus communis* or ‘community sense’. Common sense or *sensus communis* provides us with a sense of orientation in this common world. We need it in order to ‘know [our] way’⁶², ‘move about’⁶³ and ‘orient’ ourselves in the world.⁶⁴ Also, common sense is what makes it a common world. Through common sense, we experience the world as something which is real and which we share with others, by providing a common point of reference to which we relate and about which we discuss, i.e. agree or disagree. Common sense therefore has an integrative or world-

⁵⁵ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 1997 [1957], 91.

⁵⁶ Villa, 1992b, 717.

⁵⁷ ‘Philosophy and politics’, 1990 [1954], 102.

⁵⁸ Cf. HC, 280-88. Cf. Villa, 1992a, 301-02; Canovan, 1992, 151.

⁵⁹ ‘The crisis in education’, BPF, 178.

⁶⁰ HC, 209.

⁶¹ BPF, ‘The concept of history’, 89-90.

⁶² OT, 477.

⁶³ ‘The crisis in education’, BPF, 178.

⁶⁴ ‘On humanity in dark times’, MDT, 13; ‘Tradition and the modern age’, BPF, 22-23.

building effect. It regulates, ‘controls’⁶⁵, ‘adjusts’⁶⁶ or ‘coordinates’⁶⁷ our five senses and in doing so integrates or ‘fits’ us into a common world, Arendt claims repeatedly.⁶⁸ Thereby, it ‘makes possible a common world’⁶⁹, enables a sense of living in the same world and ‘make[s] us at home in the world given by our five senses’⁷⁰. Arendt accords the same effect to understanding.⁷¹ Indeed, the integrative or world-building effect, on the one hand, and the world-disclosive effect of common sense, on the other hand, are two sides of the same coin. Both effects serve as a bulwark, or antidote against world-alienation. In the next section, I will turn to a more detailed discussion of the world disclosive effect of common sense by situating common sense as the source of understanding and judging.⁷²

2. Understanding and judging

Most basically, Arendt has it that judgment or ‘judging insight’ is rooted in common sense⁷³, or, reversely, that common sense is ‘the framework within which understanding and judging [can] arise’.⁷⁴ But how are common sense, on the one hand, and judgment and understanding, on the other hand, related in Arendt’s view? She offers many tantalizing suggestions, but has never developed a systematic analysis. Usually, Arendt’s analysis of judgment and common sense is reconstructed on the basis of her *Lectures on Kant’s political philosophy*. However, in the introduction of this chapter, I argued one should be reluctant to take these lectures as containing her own theory of judgment. Rather, I think common sense is best seen as part of a hermeneutic-phenomenological, instead of a transcendental, i.e. Kantian, analysis of the processes of understanding and judgment. We get a glimpse of

⁶⁵ OT, 475-76.

⁶⁶ UP, 318.

⁶⁷ ‘The conquest of space’, BPF, 266.

⁶⁸ Cf. OT, 475-76; HC, 208-09, 283; ‘Philosophy and politics’, 1990 [1954], 84, 100; Arendt, 1954, ‘Philosophy and politics. The problem of action and thought after the French revolution. Appendix - File 4, 1; ‘The crisis in education’, BPF, 178; LOM I, 50, 59, 119; LKPP, 70; Arendt, 1971, ‘Thinking and moral considerations’, 425.

⁶⁹ ‘Philosophy and politics’, 1990 [1954], 100.

⁷⁰ LOM I, 59.

⁷¹ See chapter 1.

⁷² Cf. Lara (2008) on common sense and world disclosure. Common sense is not just the source of the mental processes of understanding and judging, but also of thinking and cognition, including science. I will not go into this because I focus on the present scholarly debate on Arendt’s notion of common sense which is entirely focused on its relation to judging and understanding.

⁷³ ‘The crisis in culture’, BPF, 221.

⁷⁴ UP, 316.

Arendt's hermeneutic-phenomenological understanding of common sense in her early essay 'Understanding and politics'.

The context of this essay is Arendt's observation that traditional yardsticks for understanding and judging phenomena and events no longer apply in the aftermath of the totalitarian experience.⁷⁵ The 'thread of tradition is broken', by which she means that we can no longer take recourse to general rules handed down by the, in our case, Western, tradition under which to subsume particular cases.⁷⁶

The originality of totalitarianism is horrible, not because some new 'idea' came into the world, but because its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment.⁷⁷

In this situation, judging is 'like counting without the notion of numbers'.⁷⁸ It is, as it were, lawless, that is, not guided by general or absolute rules, nor derived from any ground or foundation, because of the contingency of facts. The particular issue at hand in the essay, is the effort at understanding a phenomenon that, according to Arendt, is without precedent, a novel phenomenon in human history, namely totalitarianism.

In this essay, she describes common sense as common uncritical, inarticulate or preliminary understanding, which finds its expression in 'popular language'⁷⁹ and in our 'common inherited wisdom'⁸⁰. She emphasizes that common sense is double-edged, because it 'presents our effort at understanding with its chief discovery and its greatest danger'.⁸¹ Common sense is at the basis of 'true understanding'⁸², but it simultaneously contains prejudices among other implicit understandings, and thus has a tendency to reduce the new and unprecedented to the already existing and familiar.

[W]hile popular language (...) recognizes a new event by accepting a new word, it invariably uses such concepts as synonyms for others signifying old and familiar evils (...). It is as though with the first step, finding a new name for the new force which will determine our political destinies, we orient ourselves toward new and specific conditions, whereas with the second step (and, as it were, on second thought) we

⁷⁵ See last section of chapter 1.

⁷⁶ UP, 310-11, 321; LOM I, 212.

⁷⁷ UP, 309-10; Cf. UP, 313, 316.

⁷⁸ UP, 313.

⁷⁹ UP, 310-12.

⁸⁰ UP, 314, 316-17. Cf. chapter 1 and Vollrath, 1979b, 91.

⁸¹ UP, n.7, 324.

⁸² UP, 312.

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regret our boldness and console ourselves that nothing worse or less familiar will take place than general human sinfulness.⁸³

The preliminary, pre-reflective understanding of common sense is the indispensable and non-substitutable source of true, reflective understanding. In other words, it constitutes the source and substance of the hermeneutic circle. Understanding is always engaged in a hermeneutic circle, which means that it starts with uncritical, pre-reflective *Vorverständnis* and engagement, through taste, through critical explication, to explicit understanding.⁸⁴ Preliminary understanding, that is, common sense, always remains the substance of true understanding; and true understanding always returns to the subject matter of common sense. For uncritical common sense to become reflective and explicit understanding, some further operation of critical examination, explication, reflection and appropriation is required. As we have seen, the faculty of imagination plays an important role in this respect, by both distancing one from one's primary affects and by enlarging one's mentality. The representation of phenomena and events through imagination allows for the distance and disinterestedness that is required for judging soundly.

Common sense and imagination in tandem ensure that judgment eventually is no longer the expression of merely subjective, partial and interested preferences. However, this validity is neither objective. Because the human affairs are concerned with meaning, which is plural and variable as a matter of course, judgment never attains absolute objective validity. 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. Assertions concerning meaning are intersubjective, open to debate and open-ended as a matter of course. This also means that it is contingent and expresses human freedom. So common sense and imagination do not achieve subjective, nor objective, but intersubjective validity, or what I previously called situated impartiality⁸⁵, or representativeness⁸⁶. 'Die Urteilskraft erzeugt im Dialog der Menschen ein Allgemeines, dessen Universalität nicht kategorialer Art ist, nicht als Seinsbestimmung naturhaft besteht, sondern allein auf der Übereinkunft von Menschen beruht, die eine Meinung teilen können.'⁸⁷

An important implication of the circular nature of understanding and judgment rooted in common sense, is its opposition to professional philosophical thinking, or what

⁸³ UP, 312.

⁸⁴ See chapter 1.

⁸⁵ See chapter 1.

⁸⁶ Cf. Vasterling, 2007b.

⁸⁷ Vollrath, 1979b, 95.

Arendt calls ‘speculative thought’⁸⁸ or ‘pure reasoning’⁸⁹. Common sense as intimately tied to perception is the basis of political, judging insight and remains permanently in touch with the common world, the reality of which it puts an automatic trust in.⁹⁰ While common sense entertains a matter-of-fact relationship with the world, philosophical thinking, on the contrary, temporarily ‘willfully removes [man] from’⁹¹ the common world ‘for considerable periods’⁹² and hence ‘constantly transcends’ common sense.⁹³ This implies, on the one hand, that professional philosophers, as philosophers, have no access to common sense. As a consequence, Arendt contends, they lack orientation in human affairs. This is perfectly illustrated by the fate of the philosopher in Plato’s parable of the cave. Upon his return to the cave after having seen the sun, i.e. the Truth, he is unfit for living among the citizens.⁹⁴ Arendt also refers to Hegel’s statement that ‘from the point of view of common sense, philosophy is a world stood on its head, a *verkehrte Welt*.’⁹⁵ On the other hand, from the perspective of philosophical thinking, this opposition turns into hostility towards, and frequently the complete rejection of, common sense, and hence of the hermeneutic circle. Arendt calls the professional philosopher’s rejection of common sense a metaphysical fallacy, namely the intramural warfare between thinking and common sense.⁹⁶ Since Plato, Arendt argues, ‘philosophical results’ are ‘formulated in opposition to common sense’.⁹⁷ Still, thinking, like cognition and science, cannot escape being rooted in common sense at the risk of committing a metaphysical fallacy.⁹⁸

3. Neither transcendentalism nor empiricism

Let us now return to the scholarly debate on the status of Arendt’s notion of common

⁸⁸ ‘The crisis in culture’, BPF, 221.

⁸⁹ ‘The crisis in culture’, BPF, 220.

⁹⁰ LOM I, 56.

⁹¹ Arendt, 1971, ‘Thinking and moral considerations’, 425.

⁹² LOM I, 81.

⁹³ ‘The crisis in culture’, BPF, 221.

⁹⁴ ‘Philosophy and politics’, 1990 [1954], 95.

⁹⁵ ‘Tradition and the modern age’, BPF, 22-23; cf. LOM I, 89-90; LKPP, 35. Arendt refers to Hegel’s *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*.

⁹⁶ LOM I; ‘Thinking and moral considerations’, 1971; LKPP. For a discussion of the intramural warfare between thinking and common sense, see chapter 1.

⁹⁷ ‘Philosophy and politics’, 1990 [1954], 102.

⁹⁸ On the relation between science, metaphysical thought and political thinking to common sense, see DB, *Anfang* 1958, fragment 42, 590-91.

sense I mentioned in the introduction. I argued that it is neither an a priori, nor an empirical concept. Before considering her phenomenological alternative to both, let us first take a closer look at the arguments used in the debate.

Those scholars arguing in favor of an a priori and against an empirical concept, refer to Arendt's description of common sense as the organ which fits us into the common world. Additionally, they fear the relativism that an empirical reading seems to make inevitable. Do empirical conceptions of common sense not simply hand us over to mere prejudice, customs, habits, etc., that is, to the arbitrary rules of conduct prevailing in a particular community at a particular time? Would that not merely identify common sense with its perversions, the 'clichés of the public mood'⁹⁹ or even worse, *gesundenes Volksempfinden*? And was it not exactly for this reason that Arendt has always been skeptical about handed down morality or mores, the bankruptcy of which National Socialism had so plainly showed? Or is Arendt simply inconsistent here? Lyotard even goes so far as to argue that Arendt because of her sociological reading of the Kantian *sensus communis* as a concrete social consensus, risks the elimination of other voices, *Stimmen*. This confusion of an Idea into an experience of the *sensus communis* can lead, according to Lyotard to a totalitarian ideology.¹⁰⁰

Most Arendt scholars, either to their regret¹⁰¹ or to their delight¹⁰², argue that Arendt performs an empiricalization of the Kantian *sensus communis*, frequently by referring to her statement in *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* that 'one judges always as a member of a community'.¹⁰³ In her early essay 'Understanding and politics', Arendt calls common sense 'that part of our mind and that portion of inherited wisdom which all men have in common in any given civilization'¹⁰⁴ and argues that it 'presupposes a common world into which we all fit'.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Arendt insists that common sense is an earth-bound faculty.¹⁰⁶ Another indication that Arendt regards common sense as an a posteriori achievement, would be her presupposition of the possibility of the loss of common sense and its replacement by ideologies, 'superstition and gullibility', scientific theories and propaganda.¹⁰⁷ Ideologies and propaganda can, because of their inner consistency, have a 'hypnotic effect' and 'put to sleep our common sense', 'our mental organ for perceiving,

⁹⁹ Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt', 1979, 309.

¹⁰⁰ Lyotard, 1993. Cf. Vandeputte, 2008.

¹⁰¹ For example Beiner, 1982, 1992; Yar, 2000, Lyotard, 1991.

¹⁰² For example Disch, 1993, 1994; Young, 1997.

¹⁰³ LKPP, 75.

¹⁰⁴ UP, 316-17.

¹⁰⁵ UP, 318.

¹⁰⁶ 'The conquest of space', BPF, 273; cf. idem, 274.

¹⁰⁷ 'The crisis in culture', BPF; HC, 209; OT.

understanding and dealing with reality and factuality'.¹⁰⁸ Our *sensus communis* is not a transcendental, a priori faculty, for it is dependent upon real communication and we lose it if we no longer engage in discussion, the actual exchange of opinions with others. This actual communication concerns putting our opinions and judgments to the 'test of free and open examination'.¹⁰⁹

However, most scholars, including those providing overriding arguments for an empirical reading of the notion of common sense, subsequently assure that common sense is not entirely empirical, because they hold that such a reduction would entail the loss of any meaningful criterion to distinguish between common sense and mere prejudice and so lose its critical effect.¹¹⁰ What is at stake here, is the tension between the claims of *Selbstdenken* and representative thinking. Although common sense refers to a community, it is argued, it does not refer to the actual judgments of my community members, but to my imaginative anticipation of their potential judgments. Arendt's claim that 'one judges always as a member of a community' is thus qualified. Quite often, the following sentence in the *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* is cited as evidence to this effect: 'But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one's 'cosmopolitan existence'. When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator.'¹¹¹ So Arendt would maintain that she is after the idea, not the practice, of world citizenship. Moreover, *sensus communis* would be proof to her that humans are political beings by nature. Our mental capacities would reveal an a priori orientation towards each other, an interdependence that cannot be reduced to physical dependence. Just because we are human beings, we partake in a world community, not because of our needs, but because of our *sensus communis*.

It is my position that the question whether *sensus communis* is an a priori principle or is concerned with empirical sociability, is the wrong one. In Arendt's hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis, common sense has nothing to do with a priori capacities, nor is it identical with the arbitrary presuppositions of particular communities. I agree, on the one hand, with those defending an aprioristic or transcendental reading of *sensus communis*, in so far that common sense indeed relates to the constitution and conditions of human existence for Arendt. However - and this is where I depart from this reading - for her it is not, for that matter, a priori, because the human conditions change and are changed. I agree with those defending an empirical, a posteriori reading of common sense, on the

¹⁰⁸ 'On violence', CR, 110.

¹⁰⁹ LKPP, 40.

¹¹⁰ Zerrilli, 2005a, 2005b; Degryse, 2009; Vandeputte, 2008; Peeters, 2009.

¹¹¹ LKPP, 75-76; cf. 43.

other hand, to the extent that Arendt indeed appreciates the actual exchange of opinions within a particular community in her analysis of common sense. However, she acknowledges that common sense always also needs critical reflection to achieve sound understanding and judgment. This fact is most of the time ignored in empirical readings of Arendt's notion of common sense.

Both transcendental and empirical interpretations of common sense share the aim of discovering a definite yardstick to distinguish between sound judgment and mere prejudice; a transcendental faculty, on the one hand, or the imaginative anticipation of others' potential judgments, on the other hand. However, we simply never have a guarantee at our disposal, a definite yardstick to distinguish in advance between healthy common sense and mere prejudice. As Peter Fuss rightly points out, 'nothing can be taken for granted here': 'our sense of sharing something in common may erode or be deliberately destroyed, and the wisdom of common sense may at any time be unmasked as the folly of unexamined stereotypes or all too long-standing bad habits.' However, he continues, 'the fact remains that our sense of reality is intact only when 'what is' can be confirmed by many in a diversity of aspects.'¹¹² In this way, we see commonality, a common, relatively stable and recognizable point of reference in plurality. Every judgment appeals to both *Selbstdenken* and representative thinking, to independence and to taking into account others' views. Because the thread of tradition is broken, i.e. we live in a post-metaphysical modern situation, the exact proportion between the two moments is never given in advance, but context-dependent.

Both the risks of universalism, lurking in transcendental interpretations of common sense, on the one hand, and of relativism in empiricist interpretations, on the other hand, should be taken seriously. However, these risks do not apply to Arendt, for she takes a position different from both transcendentalism and empiricism, namely hermeneutic phenomenology. Besides *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy*, we nowhere in her work encounter a commitment to 'Ideas' and a priori principles. Quite on the contrary, Arendt is particularly critical about any presuppositions of the foundation of community in naturalist and essentialist assumptions. As a phenomenologist, she rejects the idea of human nature altogether and instead adopts the perspective of human conditions, which may or may not be realized, depending on other conditions and circumstances. Ideas and a priori principles are external to the sphere of political action, whereas Arendt is interested in principles and conditions which are internal to it. Besides, an a priori faculty cannot be destroyed, whereas Arendt mourns the withering away or destruction of common sense in the modern world, as we have seen. And finally, Arendt presupposes that common sense is dependent upon

¹¹² Fuss, 1979, 166-67.

communication, i.e. cannot maintain itself in solitude and is not a property of the individual. Again, most readers of *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* seem to have fallen prey to the temptation to attribute Arendt's discussion of Kant's position to herself. But if we read this discussion in the light of the rest of her work, we encounter serious discrepancies. Arendt uses a phenomenological startingpoint within which the dualism between a priori and a posteriori does not make sense at all, because it presupposes the very subject-object dualism phenomenologists reject. Arendt shows in a phenomenological vein that, like human existence and the human conditions, common sense is neither an a priori faculty, nor refers to a particular community, but is *gleichursprünglich*, co-original, with the common world. Common sense both presupposes, and enables, fits us into, a common world. It is the sense 'that we not only all have in common but which fits us into, and thereby makes possible, a common world.'¹¹³ Common sense and the common world are thoroughly interdependent. This interdependency corresponds to the ontological interdependency of world and plurality.¹¹⁴ Common sense refers both to a sense we have in common as worldly creatures, that is, as beings who create an artificial habitat to survive and to a sense of the common, which cannot be simply reduced to the first. It is something which emerges in the space between a plurality of actors and spectators, in our perpetual interaction with the common world, and which maintains this common world at the same time. It is both a feature of the human condition and hence may or may not be realized, and acquired through socialization in a particular community. 'Only because we have one common sense, that is, only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience.'¹¹⁵ From a hermeneutic perspective, there is no problem of circularity here, as Norris suggests.¹¹⁶ The circle is not a vicious, but, indeed, a hermeneutic one.

¹¹³ 'Philosophy and politics', 1990 [1954], 100.

¹¹⁴ See chapter 2.

¹¹⁵ OT, 475-76. Cf. OT, 477; UP, 318; LOM I, 50; HC, 208-09.

¹¹⁶ Norris, 1996, 173, n. 23: '[G]iven the central role played by common sense in the revelation of the world, it is circular at best to attempt to define the judgments of that sense in terms of the world it makes possible.' Cf. Biskowski (1993) who makes a similar argument as I do.