The Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Plurality: Arendt, Habermas, and Gadamer

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Despite wide-ranging reception, Arendt's work, until now, is hardly ever read and understood as relevant for hermeneutic phenomenology or phenomenological hermeneutics. The significance of Arendt's work for hermeneutic phenomenology, both its tradition and as it stands today, is that it opens up a new field of reflection, namely the field of political phenomena. Both the phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition are not particularly known for their contribution to political philosophy, though the French tradition does better in this respect than the German tradition. Some famous names in the French tradition of (hermeneutic) phenomenology, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Nancy, have written work of practical philosophical relevance. The style of Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology is as important as the topic. Far removed from the rather abstract and methodic approach practiced by her most influential teacher in hermeneutic phenomenology, Martin Heidegger, Arendt's approach is quite unorthodox. She herself describes her work as story-telling. And, indeed, her work does consist for a large part in stories that try to capture the lived experience of a whole range of political phenomena among which plurality takes center stage.

In order to bring out some of the features that are characteristic of Arendt's concept of plurality, her account will be compared to two contemporary German philosophers who share substantial common ground with her, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas. Sharing the common ground of hermeneutic phenomenology, their work is distinct enough to make for an

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1 There is, by now, growing attention for the phenomenological approach of Arendt's work but still very little acknowledgment of the hermeneutic dimension of her work. There are exceptions to this rule, of course. Paul Ricoeur (“Action, Story and History: On Re-reading The Human Condition,” Salmagundi 60 (1983): 60–72), and Seyla Benhabib (The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt (London: Sage, 1996)), for example, are sensitive to the hermeneutic and phenomenological dimension of Arendt's work. There are also some German authors who have written on hermeneutics in Arendt, for example Dag Javier Opstaele, “Die Luecke zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft; Hannah Arendts hermeneutische Theorie,” Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung 55 (2001): 101–16.
illuminating comparison. I will start with a short introduction situating Arendt's work in the historical, political and philosophical context of her time, followed by a discussion of Arendt's notion of plurality. The account of plurality will then be elaborated further by comparing it to the ones of Habermas and Gadamer. My thesis is that Arendt's account allows for a better understanding of plurality and related political phenomena like communality, consensus, dissensus, agonistic action and communicative action.

1 Situating Arendt's Work

Arendt's work integrates three strands of philosophy that are equally important to her work: political philosophy, philosophical anthropology and hermeneutic phenomenology. One can describe her work as a hermeneutic phenomenology of the human condition focusing on political phenomena and experiences. Or, in reference to the title and content of two of her major works, *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*, her work can be described as a political anthropology with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. These two works testify to the fact that Arendt's political philosophy is deeply informed by a philosophical anthropology. The former is an exposition of the *vita activa*, the activities of labor, work and action that according to Arendt typically take place in human life. The latter is a reflection on the mental faculties of thinking, willing and judging.

Though Arendt never positioned herself as such, her work is clearly part of the philosophical anthropology “school” emerging from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, consisting of philosophers like Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Hans Jonas, Merleau-Ponty,

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3 *The Life of the Mind* was set up as a trilogy, dealing with thinking, willing, and judging. Because of Arendt’s untimely death in 1975, only the first two volumes of the trilogy were written. The manuscript for the first part on thinking was preliminary revised by Arendt herself before her death whereas the second part consisted of an initial draft. Mary McCarthy, whom Arendt had appointed as her literary executor, prepared Arendt’s manuscripts for publication in 1978. In this posthumous edition McCarthy added excerpts from Arendt’s *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. These lectures were later edited and published by Ronald Beiner as Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).