

# PLURALITY AS A VALUE IN ARENDT'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Hannah Arendt is known for her claim that plurality constitutes a central value for political life. It forms the normative core of her whole standpoint. It is not that clear, however, how plurality is to be understood, and in what senses it is valuable. In my contribution I emphasize several levels as central to her standpoint.

1. Plurality as the *differences* between individuals, including an affirmation of the value of individual freedom.

2. *Worldliness* as the field of human multiplicity as in common. It situates us in a condition of *equality* (nobody is initially more worthy than anyone else) and *diversity* (of individuals)

3. The political as the *encounter of a multiplicity* of views.

4. A diagnostic distinction between institutional arrangements that *diminishes* plurality and a society that *enables plurality*.

Arendt's analysis brings together general reflections on the human condition and a diagnostic perspective of the present. She works out her normative conception from both of them.

When viewed from a contemporary perspective Arendt's conception can be assessed in two ways. We will have to ask to what extent her diagnosis is applicable in the contemporary world. It seems clear that we need additional conceptual tools to Arendt's to understand our own predicament. Second, we may ask how valid her normative standpoint is and how it may be developed. In my contribution I reflect on how her defence of plurality is to be distinguished from liberal pluralism, and how the idea of plurality as the encounter of different perspectives can be interpreted in humanist perspective as a defence of cosmopolitan human rights, a strengthening of the political domain and a decentering of power relations on a global level.

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt, political life, plurality, globalization, cosmopolitan human rights.

## 1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt is known for her defence of plurality as a central value of political life. The affirmation of plurality is an essential ingredient of the normative core of her political theory. It is not that clear, however, what she actually means by plurality, and in

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what sense or senses it is valuable. A third issue is what the relation is between the value of plurality and the place and status of political institutions. The question of plurality as a value thus needs to be approached on at least two levels. First, to make intelligible the very content of plurality as a value. Second, to connect it with Arendt's reflections on political institutions.

In recent debates several different answers to the question for what plurality is valuable have been suggested<sup>2</sup>. According to an expressive interpretation, plurality is valuable because we can only realise our freedom and narratively construct ourselves as human beings through encounters with others. Only through such encounters in a field of plurality we are able to live out our singularity. Plurality thus contributes to the wellbeing of the individual.

According to a communicative interpretation, plurality is valuable because it is only through the realisation of open dialogue and debate concerning our different perspectives on the world that there can be such a thing as an enlightened political will-formation. Plurality contributes to the democratic realisation of reason in society. According to yet a third interpretation, the realisation of plurality is a basic condition for the possibility of genuine freedom. Plurality is thus valuable as both instrumental for and a substantial ingredient in the ideal of freedom for all. In addition, plurality must also be seen as a threatened condition. It needs to be protected by a political institutional setting that is supportive of plurality.

Arendt never took any clear position to these different interpretations, and there indeed remain tensions in Arendt's texts about how to understand her position. According to my interpretation, her standpoint is not in line with any of these options in contrast with the others, but contains elements of all. The essential point is to integrate several things that are valuable and not to simply Arendt's actual position by conflating it with ideal-typical positions such as these. The main difficulty is how to understand how they can be integrated, not to choose between them, but to decide what aspects are to be integrated and what excluded.

Arendt's distinctions are never purely theoretical designed, but are linked to what I like to call a diagnostic aim to understand and assess contemporary society. Arendt works out her normative reflections towards the background of such a diagnosis. In other words, we do indeed find a normative standpoint in Arendt, but her arguments are built by simultaneous reference to the human condition *and* to the problematic issues of her times. In *The Human Condition* she thus defines her project in such diagnostic terms:

«What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears... What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing. 'What we are doing' is indeed the central theme of the book» (HC, 1958: 5).

My reading of Arendt here is intended to keep a balance between textual interpretation and an understanding of Arendt's diagnosis of the times.

Arendt always leaves open the possibility that new events, changes in the historical constellation and new developments may affect the normative standpoint. Her discourse is not closed, but remains open to the practical reality of history. I thus also very much agree with Margaret Canovan's assessment that an implication of Arendt's reflection is «...that theory is no substitute for practice. This is something that comes hard to many political theorists, for the occupational delusion of thinkers is the belief that constructing a neat theoretical scheme is equivalent to getting something done» (Canovan, 1983: 298).

## 2. Plurality

Arendt uses plurality both in a neutral and phenomenological descriptive sense as a central dimension of the human condition and as a *value* the political community ought to affirm and safeguard. This variable use creates some confusion as to how the notion is to be understood in different contexts. I shall here mainly focus on the value-aspect of the notion.

As is the case with many other notions, Arendt uses plurality in a specific but uncommon sense. By plurality she does not simply mean the mere co-existence of a multiplicity of human beings. Quite the contrary, multiplicity shall in some cases even be diametrically opposed to plurality, and to be characterised as world alienation or an experience of worldlessness rather than plurality (HC, 1958: 52–58).

As a political value, again, plurality is not to be conflated with liberal pluralism or the individual right to choose a world-view. Plurality is inherently connected with human interaction and political participation. It has been characterised alternatively as republican, radical democratic or agonistic (Canovan, 1992: 204–208; Honig, 1993; Villa, 1996: 52–61). I shall here pinpoint five aspects as central to Arendt's notion of plurality: equality, diversity, active participation, the shared world as a central mediating factor and the interactive or communicative dimension.

Arendt's characterization in *The Human Condition* is initially straightforward and clear:

«Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction» (HC, 1958: 175).

Furthermore, «plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same ... in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live» (HC, 1958: 8). In essence, then, plurality comprises two features that must be considered together: the equality of human beings as being basically the same in combination with the essential distinctness of each and the diversity between persons. It includes both a sense of our overall belongingness to the same species and the experience of a limitless variation of differences between human beings – present differences, but also past and future ones (HC, 1958: 175–192.)

Arendt treatment of equality is two-dimensional: as an ontological question concerned with of the human condition and as a political ques-

tion concerned with the realisation of equality as a value. Although the possibilities to develop a full-blown ontology are very limited, it is still important to emphasize the presence of this dimension. Otherwise it will be nearly impossible to explain the apparent stark contrast between her claims in *Origins of Totalitarianism* that «we are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group...» (OT, 1962: 301) and the claims about equality as a given part of our human condition (see also *Introduction to Politics* in *PP*, 2005: 93–94).

This combination of equality with diversity closes off the sense of analysing the human condition in terms of a human nature. There is indeed an ontological moment in Arendt's conception, but it is limited to a minimum set of conditions: «Life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality and the earth» (HC, 1958: 11, see also 9–10, 181). These conditions, furthermore, never condition us absolutely, but imply openness towards different possible ways of realising them in actual life (HC, 1958: 11). In this sense Arendt inherits the main traits of existential phenomenological reasoning: ontological conditions are schemes that may be lived out in different ways on the concrete level of the lived.<sup>3</sup> For example a political regime may limit our possibilities to realize these conditions. Thus, the condition of equality does not guarantee the realization of equality: realization is always dependent on what people actually do and what kind of society one lives in.

This co-presence of equality and diversity, however, forms only two aspects and they need to be connected with other dimensions in order to reveal the full concept. The third aspect is the importance of the shared world or worldliness as a kind of mediating factor between equality and diversity (see for example HC, 1958: 52–58, 176, 196–202, 220). This notion of shared world forms an essential basis of plurality as a political concept. Arendt defines the political in terms of a plurality that is concerned with the issues of a common world they share. It is thus primarily a sharing, and not for example pre-defined group-identities that connect people together into a political community.

Arendt also uses the notion of world in several senses. According to one usage, it is the sharing of something in common that defines a world. Two opposites of this experiential notion are worldlessness and the earth (HC, 1958: 7–9, 22–23, 52–58, see also Canovan, 1992: 105–110). The earth or the physical traits of nature do not by themselves define a world for us in this sense, but a human element of sharing is needed. A world is shared in this strict sense only insofar as a certain multiplicity really has things in common and communicates with each other about them. If we lack this, we may instead experience a withdrawal of the sense of sharing or worldlessness.

The fourth and fifth aspects of plurality are action as a mode of doing and action as a mode of communicative interaction (HC, 1958: 176–184). Arendt's notion of plurality not only refers to static aspects of the human condition, but to the active and interactive level where we actively relate to other human beings and communicate with each other. It is inherently intersubjective and dynamic, emphasising real encounters between equal

but diverse human beings. Only on this level of interactive encounters does it constitute a fully political notion.

Arendt's notion of plurality thus initially frees the political from any connection with pre-figured group-identities and institutional frameworks by anchoring it in human encounters concerning the shared world, only to tie it on the next level to the existence of *real* human encounters, thereby conceptually connecting it with the existence of some, presumably suitably small, community.

The value of plurality is thus constructed through a synthetic interconnection of several issues. Thereby it becomes clear that it should neither be conflated with multiplicity, nor as the same as liberal pluralism. It is a very "earthly" notion, emphasizing the importance to understand our earthly connection and that these internally connect us with other persons with whom the world is shared.

### 3. Community and Institutional Settings

The notion of the shared world as what is common in plurality and as what makes up the polis may be understood in various ways. According to my interpretation, it is important not to downplay the world dimension and to overemphasize the community aspects of the notion of the shared world. I think Arendt by the shared world refers to the co-presence of world and a multiplicity in encounter, not to a notion of community understood as a unified *Us* or an «our community». The world, the fact that it is shared in plurality, a plurality that is open exactly because it refers us to the world and not to a given, unified community, is an essential aspects of the notion of a shared world.

Arendt conceptualizes the political in terms of the unresolved issues common to a plurality. This is what primarily defines who belongs to a political community. This also implies that the size of a political community may vary depending on the issues involved, and it may change over time.

In addition to this floating aspect of the political community Arendt nevertheless emphasizes the essential need for a real community in order for a public sphere to be created. The public

«space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action... Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them, and the foundation of cities ... is therefore indeed the most important material pre-requisite for power» (HC, 1958: 199, 201).

Arendt emphasizes the importance of community in several places. Without a community it seems that plurality will be reduced to pure multiplicity, that is to say a manifold without the lived aspect of encounter and sharing of a world. But the community in question becomes a community through the mediation of the world, and does not form an experiential or self-conscious *Us*-perspective. Community should thus here primarily be understood as co-existence.

This co-existence may be steered and circumscribed by the existence of institutional factors, or a fabricated level of existence achieved by means of what Arendt names work: a constitution defining membership, citizenship, rights, divisions of power, a political culture etc. These fabricated dimensions of the world forms one important aspect of the world, but they can never exhaust the full dimension of worldliness that defines the political. Insofar as we share things of the world across the borders on nation-states, insofar as new event demand us to understand the world and how we share it in new ways, we may be continuously forced to reconsider the borders and content of communities.

Arendt's reasoning is strongly historical. She continuously emphasizes the specificities of the real world, the dependence of many things on work and action for their continuous existence and the importance of time. Conditions become turned into reality only through what may be called specific processes of realisation, or on what men make out of their conditions, on work and fabrication, the construction of institutional settings etc. (HC, 1958: 9–11).

In *The Human Condition* Arendt emphasises this earthly dimension of her ontology and the world. Worldliness should be understood in two senses: the fabrication of man-made things, or work, and the world as that very whole, shared by all that forms the only unifying aspect at the foundation of plurality. She writes:

«Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of existence ... [and] men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which ... possess the same conditioning power as natural things» (p. 9).

Although Arendt does not in this context mention political institutions as a form of fabricated conditions, her discussion in other works strongly suggests that they ought to be included within these. Established political institutions are, one may say, the results of both action and fabrication, and they form a concrete part of our condition. In the second place, only through the fabrication of political institutions is it possible that our actions become part of the intersubjective world as at least relatively permanent achievements. History is to a large extent made through the anchoring of innovative actions and political events in new institutional arrangements.

Arendt's reflections on institutions are in part separated into different works, and this is one of the reasons why their interconnection is sometimes difficult to comprehend. *The Human Condition* deals rather sparsely with public institutions, whereas the book published immediately afterwards, *On Revolution* treats this issue extensively, but rarely reconnects them with her ontology.

Arendt agonistically criticizes the identification of politics with governmental rule and in contrast rehabilitates a participatory conception of politics as anchored in action and plurality. This may leave the impression that she devalues the importance of political institutions, but such a judg-

ment would be misguided. This becomes clear especially if we read *On Revolution* in tandem with *The Human Condition*.

Viewed from Arendt's diagnostic perspective political institutions may function either to diminish or to strengthen plurality. This thesis is well expressed by Margaret Canovan: «...plurality is inescapable, but ... worldly institutions ... can provide a way of holding people together while leaving them space in which to differ» (1983: 300). It is thus indeed possible that institutional frameworks create oppressive forms of rule, and this negative possibility is a major motivating factor for Arendt's engagement in these issues in the first place. The very bulk of her research, one may say, lies with the ambition to discern forms of government that dominate and repress us.

But the institutional setting of a society also forms one aspect of the fabricated world that is shared by a plurality (HC, 1958: 220–230). Institutions are thus a part of our condition. Furthermore, only through the fabrication of constitutions, laws, political institutions, etc. may action be turned into more permanent historical achievements, achievements we can learn from and build upon (HC, 1958: 136–139, 204). Actions need to be anchored in the intersubjective world in order for them to have any long-standing effects and to become real results.

This concern with the institutional dimension of politics is deepened in Arendt's comparison of the pros and cons of the American and French Revolutions in *On Revolution* (OR, 1963: 115–214). Throughout the book Arendt places the American Revolution in a more positive light than the French one, although she concludes with a critique of how the American model in actual fact turned out. The American Revolution embodied, in its primordial, active moment, at least three things Arendt finds important. It was, first, a participatory movement inducing change. Second, it was from the beginning informed by a suspicion that all government may turn oppressive. Third, it took seriously the challenge to establish institutional safeguards that would both enable people to participate and create checks against potential abuses of power.

All political movements that induce change need to think through the transition from the level of action, constitutive of all such movements, to the level of institutions. Only the fabrication of institutional arrangements can make the changes introduced into a real and relatively permanent part of the shared world. Arendt argues that these two levels demand different reflective logics. It is not the same to reason about what we want to do and to reason about what kind of institutions could best ensure that what we want could be safeguarded as a permanent part of reality (OR, 1963: 141–154.)

Arendt is particularly critical of the French Revolution's failure to consider this difference. The political unification necessary to bring about change, for example a popular movement, risks turn into a totalitarian form of rule if one fails to rethink the values inspiring the movement in terms of the demands of an institutional system (OR, 1963: 141–154). Rousseau's conception of the general will as the unified sovereign functions well as long as the goal is transformation. But the idea of a centralized

and unified authority remained intact in the French conception of popular sovereignty, and thus made possible defending terror by reference to the interests of the people (OR, 1963: 181–185, 215–248). This conflated the logic of a popular movement with the logic of institutional frameworks.

Arendt here places especially one central institutional principle in the foreground: Montesquieu's idea of a division of powers (OR, 1963: 150–154). She calls this a brilliant insight. Its core content is that «only 'power arrests power'» (OR, 1963: 151), only another power can keep a power under control without, Arendt adds, destroying it. First, the institutions of society should be organized in such a way that no single instance can gain full control and rule over the polity. This, of course, is a very commonplace argument. But how does it fit together with Arendt's conception of active and participatory citizenship, an activity that seems so different from an institutional safeguard against domination?

And how does the principle of division of powers fit together with Arendt's conception of power? Arendt famously defines power as acting in concert, and distinguishes power from strength, violence, rule and sovereignty (*On Violence* in CR, 1972: 134–155). She defends power as a necessary and important aspect of politics, and does not consider it a bad thing. But if power in this sense is the positive outcome of a plurality of freedoms that act together, why should it have to be divided and arrested?

Arendt's point appears more intelligible when viewed from a diagnostic perspective. The very bulk of her research lies with an ambition to discern forms of government that comes to dominate and represses. There are especially two clear examples of this in Arendt's work: totalitarianism and modern mass-society. Both limit the possibility of active citizenship and tend toward a unification of the polity, although in different ways. These examples show that plurality is a vulnerable dimension of the human condition that needs or at least gains from the establishment of an institutional setting that could promote plurality. The division of powers is exactly such a setting because, one may argue, it is itself based on the very idea of plurality.

Second, then, the division of power must not destroy power, but only keep it under control. Arendt's thesis becomes intelligible only if the emphasis is on arrest, and not on abolishing power. There should indeed be institutional safeguards against power turned into dominating rule, but it ought simultaneously to enhance citizen empowerment.

*On Revolution* ends with Arendt's defence of the council-level of the political activity (OR, 1963: 275–281), later repeated in *Thoughts on Action and Revolutions* (in CR). Here we seem to have in concrete form Arendt's political ideal: a group of people that freely come together in a smaller scale council, and realize plurality through open and free deliberation on common issues. On the other hand, in the light of her reflections on the logic of institutions, it seems that the existence of this possibility is also dependent on institutional framework that safeguards it.



## Conclusion

It is thus important for us to strive to understand the basic conditions of human life, included our earthly condition as a world shared by a multiplicity. But human action and the establishment of political institutions may either contribute to the actualisation of plurality as a communicative relation between freedoms, or they may develop into obstacles or forces contrary to this. No theoretical standpoint per se can decide on these issues, what is needed is the combination of theoretical reflection and an experiential-diagnostic attentiveness to what is going on in the world. The message of Arendt's normative standpoint, however, is clear: political society and human action ought to contribute positively to the realisation of plurality. Not, however, a plurality that is given free room for some to dominate over others, but exactly a plurality that gives room to everyone's freedom and to diversity.

As for her diagnostic viewpoint I think many today will agree that what Arendt calls plurality is still very much under siege, although the threats today must probably be understood differently than through the lenses of totalitarian rule and social administration. As for her normative standpoint, the discussion on these issues continues today for example in the debates on deliberative and agonistic conception of democracy, and these debates have surpassed at least some of Arendt's claims, not by proving them wrong, but by taking them seriously and a step further. What is still lacking is a reconsideration of the value of plurality as such, and this is one of the reasons why I find a study of this issue important.

In her essay *Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?* from the mid 60s Arendt re-poses all of these questions again on the level of a global society. As so many others today, she is highly critical of any idea of an all-encompassing world state, which, she writes, would surely create a monstrosity. Instead she defends the establishment of institutional arrangements and the creation of a communicative culture that would secure basic equality in combination with diversity, in other words plurality. Such a diversity should be realised both on the level of differences between individuals and between different historical communities, preserving their richness but fighting their dogmatisms. Her hope lies with what she calls a philosophy of mankind, in contrast to a universalistic philosophical anthropology or philosophy of Man, and it should be based on a concept of communication, one that she finds in Jaspers.

«This philosophy of mankind will not abolish ... the great philosophical systems of the past in India, China and the Occident, but will strip them of their dogmatic metaphysical claims, dissolve them, as it were, into trains of thought which meet and cross each other, communicate with each other and eventually retain only what is universally communicative. A philosophy of mankind is distinguished from a philosophy of Man by its insistence that not Man, talking to himself in the dialogue of solitude, but men talking and communicating with each other, inhabit the earth» (p. 90).

## Abbreviations

OT = The Origins of Totalitarianism  
HC = The Human Condition  
BPF = Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought  
OR = On Revolution  
MDT = Men in Dark Times  
CR = Crises of the Republic  
EU = Essays in Understanding  
PP = The Promise of Politics

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> This paper originates in a talk given at the symposium *The Legacy of Hannah Arendt in The Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in 2007 organized by Department of Philosophy, European Humanities University and Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, Vilnius University. I have kept the straightforward style from the oral presentation. I have discussed these issues further but the perspective of cosmopolitanism in: *Cosmopolitan plurality in Arendt's political philosophy // Ethical Perspectives*. 2008. Vol. 15, № 2.
- <sup>2</sup> See for example: Passerin d'Entreves M. *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (p. 84–85) and Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (p. 128–154).
- <sup>3</sup> I would here compare Arendt's conception with the French existential phenomenologists de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, rather than Heidegger. Arendt more strongly than Heidegger emphasizes the active aspect of doing something out of what we have been made into, to paraphrase Sartre. This does not deny the fact that Arendt was influenced by Heidegger's philosophy.