39

HANNAH ARENDT

Sophie Loidolt

39.1. Arendt—a phenomenologist?

It is hardly disputable that Hannah Arendt had ties to the phenomenological tradition. Her biography and formation clearly situate her within the context of phenomenology and Existenz philosophy, well before she found her own way into political theory. The more disputed question is how important phenomenology remained for Arendt when developing her central ideas concerning the political, action, plurality, and freedom. Did she leave phenomenological philosophy altogether, because it simply, like all philosophy, couldn’t account for genuinely political phenomena, methodically always remaining an “existential solipsism”? Or did she develop a new, genuinely political phenomenology?

Her own statements concerning this question are somewhat ambivalent. In the television interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt famously refuses being called a philosopher. Philosophy, she says also on other occasions, always deals with “man in the singular” while her field of “political theory” investigates plurality and plural existence. In what will follow, I take this to be a very philosophical statement that transforms philosophy itself. However, as she adds in the interview with a charming as well as ironic smile, apart from not feeling like a philosopher, she hasn’t even been “accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you [Gaus] so kindly suppose” (Arendt 1994a, 1). If we look at how little Arendt is taught at philosophy departments compared to her overall success with readers all over the globe, and, for that matter, how rarely her positions are discussed in “serious” phenomenological publications, this is a somewhat bitter self-fulfilling prophecy (with an ironic smile, to be sure). We know, on the other hand, that with her last book The Life of the Mind, Arendt explicitly returned to philosophy and phenomenology and that she even once described herself as a “sort of phenomenologist, but, ach, not in Hegel’s way—or Husserl’s” (Young-Bruehl 1982, 405). The situation is thus by far not as clear as some interpreters suggest who argue that the “political Arendt” had said goodbye to it all: philosophy and phenomenology.

A glance on the abundant literature on Arendt shows that this ambivalence concerning her phenomenological involvement tends to be reproduced. This happens, unfortunately, either in a slightly clueless or in a rather hostile way. While many studies mention Arendt’s phenomenological heritage and sometimes even label her approach as a “phenomenology” of public space, judgment, the political, etc., it often remains unclear what the exact conceptual content of “phenomenology” amounts to in these cases and what should be the substantial benefit of taking
a phenomenological view on these issues. It is no wonder that some commentators have then come to the rather superficial conclusion that phenomenology somehow belongs to Arendt's eclectic toolbox, while leaving us in the dark which elements she actually takes up of this tradition and why this should be philosophically interesting (cf. Barton-Kriese 1998).

Another strand of the reception avoids these ambiguities by explicitly rejecting Arendt's phenomenological influences and/or methodology. More often than not, this rejection stems from a negative political evaluation of "political existentialism" and, on top of that, of Arendt's personal involvement with Martin Heidegger. Occasionally, this sort of evaluation has reached the level of "guilt by association" (Villa 1996, 115). The more balanced accounts deny this, but still see a "phenomenological essentialism" (Benhabib 2003, xlv, 123f.) at work that is held responsible for Arendt's sometimes awkward statements concerning a strict separation of "the political" from social questions. Without being able to demonstrate this here, I would argue that "phenomenology" in these cases is employed as a strawman while in-depth analyses are missing. But also on the phenomenological side, it has to be stated, in-depth conceptual and systematical studies on Arendt are (still) rare. One reason for this, especially in the English-speaking world where the Arendt reception is dominated by Critical Theory and poststructuralist approaches, could be that Arendt wrote many of her texts twice: first in English, where she addressed an audience not familiar with the philosophical tradition she came from, and then in German, where these intellectual roots manifested themselves, as it were, naturally in her writing. To a reader of these German "second originals," Arendt's phenomenological connections will be much more evident and salient than they appear in the English versions. This especially counts for The Human Condition.

Drawing on this background, I will sketch out roughly in this chapter what I take to be the real "phenomenological Arendt"—who is, at the same time, the "political Arendt." In contrast to the eclecticism camp I will claim that there is a deep, often only implicit structure and methodology at work in Arendt's approach that is clearly phenomenological in origin, and that her readings of other philosophers such as Kant and Aristotle are, in fact, phenomenological readings. This, however, should not result in simply putting Arendt in the "phenomenology-box." No boxes or banisters will ever capture the richness of her thought. It will, however, shed a new light on some of Arendt's core notions and ways of thinking and allow for a deeper understanding of both.

### 39.2. How phenomenology operates in Arendt's work

In a paper on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Eugen Fink differentiates between "operative" concepts and "thematic" concepts employed by philosophical thinkers. While the latter are in the focus of the thinker's attention, the former are the tacit "conceptual medium" in and through which the thinker moves in order to formulate and elaborate her themes. As Fink puts it, this conceptual medium "is what is not seen because it is the medium of seeing" (Fink 1981, 61). I find this distinction a useful tool to point to the phenomenological influence in Arendt's work. Indeed, I want to claim that phenomenology, for Arendt, is the medium of seeing the political the way she does.

My claim is this: Arendt's thought revolves around a core phenomenon that, in methodical terms, is comparable to Levinas' basic situation of the "face to face encounter" with the other, which lies at the heart of his ethical reflections. Explaining the implications of such a "core phenomenon" or "core situation" uncovers the fundamental structures of meaning that found a whole dimension of human life, such as the ethical or the political. In this sense, Arendt takes "the political" and its meaning to crystallize when plurality is actualized in a space of appearances.
Why is this a “phenomenon” and, moreover, a “core phenomenon” that requires a phenomenological approach?

(1) First of all, it is something that appears and is experienced. To be more precise: It is an event which needs to appear intersubjectively (and thus publicly) and which needs to be experienced intersubjectively (and thus as something real, from different perspectives) in order to happen. Husserl’s as well as Heidegger’s phenomenological approaches have developed tools to describe and analyze phenomena like these. Arendt uses these tools and pushes them further into an intersubjective, worldly, plural, and politicized paradigm.

(2) Second, Arendt draws the phenomenal structure of “actualizing plurality” from basic experiences instead of starting on the higher, more abstract level of discourse, rational argumentation, or the normativity of the concepts of “politics,” “freedom,” or “justice.” The meaning harbored in these concepts, she would claim, can only stem from common experiences that have been transformed into thoughts and ideas. Going back to these experiences and phenomena is essential. Why? Because when plurality is actualized in speaking, acting, or judging, a meaning-dimension is revealed in the course of the interaction itself. This not only points to the pre-reflective roots of certain concepts but also to the existentially meaningful component in political (inter)action, as it is something we live through and which thereby makes us who we are.

(3) Arendt hermeneutically unfolds this existential dimension, by analyzing either contemporary political events or by unearthing experiences in the past, be it the Athenian polis or the American Revolution. But there is also the negative mirror image of these experiences, which very much concerns Arendt. It is undisputed that totalitarianism is one of the main negative motors of her political thinking. I would like to understand this in the context that Arendt claims that totalitarianism makes persons into “no one,” that it robs them of their property and place in the community, and that it finally strives to radically annihilate plurality and natality in the terror of the camps. This means that it aims at destroying all conditions that could make experiences of an actualization of plurality possible. The same, in a softer version, counts for a consumerist capitalist mass society. Both systems produce experiences of deprivation, world-alienation, senselessness, and loneliness (of the masses), which Arendt reveals and criticizes.

(4) “Saving the phenomena” (Arendt 1977b, 3), one of Arendt’s oft-used quotes, thus amounts to saving the precise articulation of what makes us political beings (and what doesn’t)—which points to experiences, not to ideas, and to interaction, not to theory. As follows from this, “experiences” for Arendt are never simply occurring empirical events or just subjective impressions but are always regarded with respect to their essential structure and existential meaning. “Actualizing plurality in a space of appearance” articulates such a structure that lies at the heart of experiences of “the political.”

(5) Finally, Arendt’s claim is that it is the ontological primal fact of plurality (in its phenomenologically conceived contingent actualization) that fundamentally politicizes our Being and not, for example, the friend–enemy constellation as in Carl Schmitt. This claim has its normative implications, not only for the term of “the political”—in contrast to “politics”—but also for a whole political theory derived from it. Yet, as Arendt would argue, this is not a construed normativity derived from an imposed idea or concept, but one that lies in the phenomenon itself, in the experiences we make with it, as well as in its conditions of success. Arendt, I want to claim, thereby develops a phenomenologically grounded political theory that, in contrast to her French existentialist colleagues, can do without a Marxist background, and in contrast to Heidegger and Schmitt, can and wants to argue for an intrinsically demo-
cratic and isonomic constellation, one that needs to be protected from an antagonism that aims at destroying plurality itself.

From these short notes we can already see that by conceiving the political as such, several operative concepts are in play that are genuinely phenomenological concepts: first and foremost, appearance, experience, and world, but also intentionality/transcendence, intersubjectivity/Being-with, and meaning-constitution/existentialia. However, the phenomenon in question does not leave the concepts and their methodological implications untouched. According to a basic phenomenological conviction, methodical tools are to be drawn from the “things themselves” and should not be simply applied to whatever comes along. This has kept the phenomenological tradition a lively and dynamic intellectual community, whose most prominent figures are often critics of their teachers in the name of the phenomena themselves. And here again, I would like to point to a parallel between Arendt and Levinas: Just like Levinas’ explanation of the ethical core situation forced him to rethink and reconceptualize basic phenomenological concepts to arrive at an “ethics as first philosophy,” so does Arendt rethink the phenomenological and philosophical tradition in the name of the political, and thereby politicizes the phenomenological ontology of appearance.

My answer to the question raised at the beginning of the chapter thus would be the following: Arendt indeed uses phenomenological concepts in order to develop her main political ideas, but thereby also transforms them. This constitutes her genuinely political phenomenology, which is also a methodically reflected enterprise that fits well into the bunch of heterogeneous and transformative projects by other second-generation phenomenologists like Levinas, Sartre, Patočka, or Merleau-Ponty.

39.3. Arendt’s phenomenological concepts, methods, and concerns: a short overview

In the next step, I will very roughly sketch out some main lines of thought that Arendt shares with the phenomenological tradition and that put her in the midst of some prominent phenomenological debates (where she has not yet been sufficiently recognized). A deeper understanding of what “phenomenology” means in Arendt’s work must systematically investigate these issues.

39.3.1. Appearance

It has been widely recognized that Arendt’s concept of appearance refers to the worldview of the ancient Greeks and Nietzsche’s re-appropriation of it, as well as to Kant’s Third Critique. These references, however can only fruitfully converge and be held together by an operative notion of appearance that is of phenomenological origin. Why is that so? Developing a “philosophy of appearance” as Arendt does requires a strong theoretical position with regard to the relation of “Being” and “appearance.” And this is a position that Arendt clearly takes, most articulately in The Life of the Mind. She does this also by distancing herself from Kant, whose notion of appearance, as she claims, still carries the meaning of semblance in it and thereby continues to subscribe to a metaphysics of two worlds (Arendt 1977a, 40). On the other hand, she limits a Nietzschean aestheticized notion of appearance by tying it back to the constitution of reality and truth (cf. Villa 1996, 103f.). Quotes like “Being and Appearing coincide” (Arendt 1977a, 19), “semblances are possible only in the midst of appearances” (Arendt 1977a, 38), “truth can be conceived only as another appearance” (Arendt 1977a, 24) and “evidence is inherent in a world of appearances” (Arendt 1977a, 54) serve as vibrant examples for her endorsement of the phenomenological take
on these matters. At the same time, Arendt fundamentally pluralizes and politicizes the classic phenomenological notion of appearance. As Jacques Taminiaux nicely put it:

"Precisely because they [Being and appearing, S.L.] coincide, nothing of what is, i.e., of what appears, is strictly singular: instead, it remains offered to the gaze of several spectators. And those spectators in the plural are also offered as a spectacle, they are at the same time perceiving and perceived."

(Taminiaux 1997, 127)

The plurality of perspectives is thus “no obstacle to the identity of emerging spectators, it is constitutive of it” (Taminiaux 1997, 127). This implies three further theses which are discussed in the following sections: (1) To be real means to appear; (2) to be a self means to appear; (3) to “be-of-the-world” means to fundamentally belong to the realm of appearance.

39.3.2. The question of reality

All three theses go back to Arendt’s early and initial concern for the question of reality that she comes to conceive in “intersubjective” terms—however not in a Husserlian, constitutional manner but in an existential fashion. In the early essay “What is Existenz philosophy?” (Arendt 1994b) from 1946, these concerns and the direction she takes to solve them become visible in her critique of Husserl’s as well as Heidegger’s approach to the question of reality: While Husserl’s concepts of intentionality and the reduction appease the existential “shock of reality” by a constitutional analysis in consciousness, Heidegger’s fixation on the self renders void his insights into the reality of “being together” and leaves him with an “existential solipsism.” This is Arendt’s verdict, which makes her turn to new solutions. Arendt’s own position first develops from her appropriation of Jaspers’ existential interpretation of the Kantian themes of freedom and dignity as a “surplus” to all thought working in communication with others. But she soon rejects Jaspers’ preference of an I-Thou-situation and heads towards rethinking Heidegger’s unthought space of Miteinandersein, and thus a “we.” This is where the notion of plurality (which does not yet appear in the early paper on Existenz philosophy) becomes relevant.

39.3.3. Becoming a self and experiencing reality in the medium of plurality

Turning to thinking of the existence of “men” in the plural and not the essence of “man” in the singular is Arendt’s programmatic step into what she calls “political theory.” But at the heart of this political theory there lies an answer to the phenomenologically and existential questions on self, world, and reality raised above—and those answers, I contend, remain phenomenological in style. Besides common action, realizing freedom and the new, what Arendt aims at in her major works is the experience of reality and the articulation of individuality through human plurality.

The phenomenological ancestry of the notion of plurality is to be found in the concepts of intersubjectivity (Husserl) and Mitsein (Heidegger). Keeping this in mind allows for a more sophisticated reading than the “standard-interpretation,” which fails to capture the real radicality of Arendt’s ontological and phenomenological commitment to plurality (cf. Cavarero 2005, 191). Often this is reduced to a theory of pluralism or to the simple statement “that many and different or distinct men inhabit the earth” (Dossa 1988, 74). When talking about “uniqueness in plurality,” Arendt, however, never has differences in mind that could be framed in the language of third-personally attributed properties or dispositions—eventually not even in narratives, since we are dealing with something “intangible” (an expression that reminds of Levinas’ as well
as Husserl’s notions of alterity). What makes humans unique is not that they are just many and different in qualities (a “what”), but that they are an irreducible first-person access or openness to the world (a “who”) and that they are able to articulate this being-a-perspective. Being-an-access or being-a-perspective is nothing distanced or theoretical, but a practical immersedness into the world through activities, in which one experiences and appears and is experienced in one’s appearance by others who also appear. Plurality is thus a plurality of fundamental perspectives actively sharing a common world in which they appear.

Without being able to go deeper into these issues here, I would like to point to six basic theses that I take to be vital for Arendt’s conception of the “who” as well as for the fundamental features of political intersubjectivity and her basic political ontology (cf. Loidolt 2017, 181–188):

(1) “Who one is” appears and develops only together with others (the thesis of self-appearance-in-togetherness).

(2) What appears is not controllable. It might reveal itself better to others than it does to oneself (the thesis of anarchic appearance).

(3) The appearance of the “who” is at the same time a withdrawal with respect to propositional and narrative language (the withdrawal-thesis).

(4) Still, speaking and acting leave something behind that can be woven into a story (the narrativity-thesis).

(5) The appearance of the “who” needs and sustains a space of appearance. Its medium of appearance is a web of relationships (the thesis of the second in-between).

(6) The appearance of the “who” together with others is experienced as an end-in-itself and creates a shared reality (the end-in-itself and reality thesis).

### 39.3.4. *The enactive character of plurality*

Now, it is crucial for Arendt’s approach that she regards the activities of speaking, acting, and judging as well as a space of visibility (“the public”) as necessary for actualizing plural uniqueness—which otherwise remains unarticulated. In the latter case, differences between people really only amount to a mere difference in properties (different genetic codes, fingerprints, and other features of “uniqueness” that are important at borders) and not in perspectives. Plurality is hence not just an ontological fact, but essentially something we do, something we have to actualize together. This enactive character also makes it fundamentally precarious and in need of encouragement and support. On the other hand, Arendt, through her life, develops a whole “architecture” of the actualized space of plurality: While acting and speaking make up/constitute the closely intertwined ontological core domain of plurality, judging expands its horizon to the dimension of spectators who judge actors and thereby form a community. It is in this full sense that Arendt contends that plurality is essential for a sense of self, a sense of reality, and a sense of acting, speaking, and judging that realizes the specific freedom of creatures who express their individuality by relating to the world and others. Furthermore, the space of actualized plurality is guided by a “logic” of its own. Arendt’s respective demand that the “principles” of political action must be drawn from “experiences which are entirely based on the presence of others” (Arendt 1998, 237) and not from any moral principles foreign to the political domain is a demand that is typical of a phenomenological approach where the method is prescribed by the phenomenon in question. Here, Arendt can be seen in line with Reinach’s tradition in examining “social acts” like promising and forgiving. In her case, these analyses serve as possible answers to the challenges of an action-based intersubjective space, shaped by the unpredictability, irreversibility, and boundlessness of action.
39.4.5. Actualization of the self-other-world-relation, anti-Cartesianism, and being-of-the-world

All of this happens in a world of appearance—but to understand this properly I would like to emphasize another basic strand of phenomenological thought that Arendt inscribes herself to by her anti-Cartesianist argumentation, by her concept of Being-of-the-world, and by conceptualizing existence mainly through activities that actualize specific world- and other-relations. “Actualizing plurality” does not describe a static or substantial concept, but something that happens in a “verbal sense” like an activity, e.g. the activity of dancing or conducting a conversation. This points to a typically “operative concept” in Arendt’s thought that is crucial for a profound understanding of the phenomenological approach in general: Appearance, which equals the intentional presence of the world, is not thought as a functional or causal relation between two pregiven substances, subject and object. Instead, appearance is the basic event, a state of actuality, from which subjectivity, world, and intersubjectivity emerge as interrelated elements. Without recognizing the verbal sense as an operative element in Arendt’s thought, we cannot properly understand how she conceives of the world-relation as well as the intersubjective relation. I have already pointed to the structural similarities between Arendt’s and Levinas’ transformative critiques of phenomenology and philosophy. In both cases this entails a strong critique and reformulation of the classic picture of subjectivity. Instead of the classical “dative of appearance” that remains in itself, Arendt’s brand of subjectivity is turned “inside out” and enacts itself in the world. This transformation of the classic transcendental subjectivity is also comparable to corresponding movements in the philosophies of Fink, Merleau-Ponty, and Patočka (cf. Loidolt 2017, 89–93).

In The Life of the Mind, which is certainly Arendt’s most phenomenological book, she takes this insight a step further and develops a fundamental ontology based on appearance: We are “of the world” in the sense that the world of appearance is our home that we never leave. This means: we never stop appearing in the world, even if we are occupied with the activity of thinking that allows us to distance ourselves from this immediate realm of appearances and to “make sense” of it. In exploring the experiences and “transcendental illusions” of thinking, Arendt continues Merleau-Ponty’s (1968, and 2005) critique of intellectualism and his investigations into “perceptual faith.” I would argue, however (or: therefore), that in phenomenological discussions of Heidegger’s (1962) “being-in-the-world” and Merleau-Ponty’s “Être-au-monde,” Arendt’s conceptual twist of “being-of-the-world” still needs much more attention and further investigation. Arendt is the phenomenological thinker who seriously takes into account the worldly self-appearance of consciousness/Dasein and gives it a political dimension from the outset.

Finally, Arendt develops three different but closely interrelated notions of “world”: first, the “appearing world,” the fundamental space of appearance, in which being equals appearing; second, the world of objects and objectivity (die Dingwelt), which we encounter in the activity of working; and third, the “second in-between,” which emerges through our intersubjective relations (die Mitwelt). The interrelations of these multifaceted and multilayered dimensions of “world” guide many of Arendt’s analyses and lead to a rich picture of activities and visibilities creating different and sometimes competing world-spaces.

This also points to a uniqueness in Arendt’s approach: In contrast to a stable phenomenology, where the world is an ultimate horizon that encompasses all being, or a Bewandtniszusammenhang (context of involvements) pertaining to Dasein (Heidegger 1962, §18 and 355, 359, 368), Arendt emphasizes that the world is a frail and endangered space that constantly has to be intended in order to sustain it. What is at stake here is the third notion of world, the web of relationships or Mitwelt, which, as she argues, holds everything together and which—to come back to the initial
problem—also guarantees our sense of reality, the reality of our bearings in the world and of ourselves. World and worldliness are thus not simply theoretical issues for Arendt, but urgent political problems: Her diagnosis of “worldlessness,” “loss of world,” and “world alienation” in the Modern Age is one of her core motivations for promoting a new philosophy of actualized plurality. Arendt’s whole phenomenology of the world is thus pervaded by a normative tendency.

39.3.6. Crisis and “Besinnung”

This brings me to a last train of thought, which Arendt deeply shares with other prominent phenomenologists: the diagnosis of “crisis” as found in Husserl’s book on the “Crisis” of European sciences and mankind (Husserl 1954/1970) and in Heidegger’s critique of technology (Heidegger 1977). There is a striking similarity in the general structure of Husserl’s, Heidegger’s and Arendt’s respective treatments of the modern situation: It is that of a crisis in present times that has been triggered by a certain forgetfulness and which can only be confronted by means of a radical reconsideration (Besinnung). Since we are always immersed in the meaning-structures upon which we try to reflect, we must embark on a hermeneutical enterprise, for which Arendt, in the German version of The Human Condition, uses precisely the same term as Husserl (Husserl 1954, 4, 16) and Heidegger (Heidegger 1977, 155) (Arendt 1981, 13): Besinnung (reconsideration or reflection). It is not a coincidence that all three authors are drawn to a word that includes the German word Sinn (sense or meaning). It indicates their domain of reflection on processes that constitute meaning-structures that form the basic understanding of our being-in-the-world. Undoubtedly, what Husserl, Heidegger, and Arendt understand as their present “crisis” and what each regards as a “remedy” is not the same. Arendt’s claim is that it is neither intersubjective constitution (Husserl), nor Being (Heidegger), but action that has been forgotten. This is the decisive step into a political version of a phenomenological critique of modernity. Arendt’s goal is to revive the experience of the public realm as a doxastic space of appearance and meaning, or, at least, to create public awareness of this “loss of human experience” (Arendt 1998, 321).

39.4. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to show how we can acquire a deep and fruitful understanding of “the phenomenological Arendt” instead of only superficially employing the term “phenomenology” when characterizing her philosophy of action, plurality, or public space. Once more, I would like to emphasize that I do not claim that Arendt doesn’t also use other, e.g. post-meta-physical strategies such as “pearl diving” with respect to history, as Seyla Benhabib (2003, 172) has argued. My claim is rather that several operative and thematic concepts of phenomenological origin, such as appearance, experience, and world, guide Arendt’s thinking, and that her core descriptions of plurality and of what happens in action, speech, and judgment are results of her implicit phenomenological take on these issues.

Arendt is therefore rightfully to be counted among the phenomenological tradition for having developed her own phenomenology of plurality; at the same time, the theme of human plurality harbors philosophical implications that transform and politicize the classical phenomenological framework. I hope to have demonstrated at least in its outlines that Arendt’s notion of plurality requires a phenomenological in-depth explanation to be fully understood in its significance and consequences. The result is a strong and genuinely phenomenological approach to political intersubjectivity and political philosophy which, in the classical phenomenological framework, has remained underdeveloped.
Notes

1 Key examples for this position are the publications of Martin Jay (1986) and Richard Wolin (2001, 30–69) who have gone as far as associating Arendt with the political existentialism of the National Socialists Carl Schmitt and Alfred Bäumer.

2 I have elaborated this thesis in detail in Loidolt (2017) and will occasionally point to pertinent passages for further argumentation with respect to issues I can only briefly touch upon here.

3 I use both the Husserlian as well as the related Heideggerian terms in order to indicate that I do not see Arendt only as a follower of Heidegger, but consider her phenomenological mindset in the broader context of the phenomenological tradition (cf. Loidolt 2017, 6–7).

4 To be sure, narratives do let us know who someone is and by no doubt occupy a central place in Arendt’s thinking. However, Arendt also insists on the appearance of “the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech” (Arendt 1998, 181). This withdrawing appearance of the living person always remains “intangible” and can never be captured by characterizations nor by narratives.

References


