Juliane Rebentisch

The Plurality Dispute

Debates with Hannah Arendt

(Original German title: Der Streit um Pluralität. Auseinandersetzungen mit Hannah Arendt)

287 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 14 February 2022

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2022

Sample translation by Alexander Booth

pp. 7 — 27

1. Intellectuals in dark times

There is no doubt that today the writings of Hannah Arendt are once again being read with great interest, not least due to the actuality of their themes. Her unsparing depictions of flight and statelessness, her clear-sighted analysis of the aporia of human rights as well as her impressive thoughts on the relationship between politics and truth have made their way to the centre of our moment's public debates. Arendt's everyday reality was notoriously formed by her experience of antisemitism, state terror, flight, and statelessness and, in the USA, by the revelations of the history of the Vietnam war which was riddled with untrue claims, deception, and self-deception on the part of the US government. Despite the historical differences, Arendt's attempts to understand her own present appear to speak directly to our own. Not even half a century after Hannah Arendt's death in December 1975 again we find ourselves in a situation in which ethno-nationalist right-wing parties are celebrating victories across the globe, we saw a US president doing everything in his power to bury the difference between truth and untruth from the beginning to the end of his term, and every day the terrible conditions in the ever more numerous and ever larger refugee camps—despite the work of international aid organizations and NGOs—demonstrate anew the brutal core of nation-state sovereignty. 'When reading Arendt today […] there is an eerie sense of contemporary relevance.'[1]

[1] Cf. Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now* (Medford: Polity Press, 2018).

As much as the topics justify why Arendt today posthumously appears as the 'thinker of the hour' the contemporary Arendt-Renaissance cannot be explained by considering her subject matter alone. There is also a fascination for the person of the thinker herself, due on the one hand to Hannah Arendt's moving biography in the maelstrom of 20th-century political history[2] and, on the other, to the intellectual temperament of a woman who interpreted the century in ways that by no means remained unchallenged. This temperament is evidenced not only by some pictures and sound recordings, for example, her famous TV interview with Günter Gaus.[3] It is also in the tone of all her texts, the extraordinary independence of her judgments, and the great consistency with which she defended them in public despite sometimes considerable opposition and at great personal cost. The intellectual-historical importance of Hannah Arendt is not least measured by the at times great controversies her publications provoked in the public sphere.

Arendt was a pugnacious intellectual, and this pugnacity is supported by her convictions. It would be doing a real disservice to Arendt's legacy to grant her writings the authority of sacred texts and thus remove them from the realm of living debate. Attempting such canonisation would ostensibly not be all that promising an endeavour anyway because one of the essential qualities of Arendt's work is that it precisely resists such attempts: the theses often too provocative, the tone frequently too sarcastic, the argumentation too wilful. There is an internal connection between the obstinate nature of the texts and the theses developed within them. For the fact that the author's person cannot be removed from her work, that she remains present in it in a specific way, is not insignificant when it comes to a theme that runs like a red thread through all her publications: plurality.

Indeed, the conviction that human dignity cannot be conceived of without plurality forms the background to all her controversial interventions. This conviction underlies her condemnation of thoughtlessness as a banal but therefore particularly far-reaching form of evil in her book on Eichmann, as well as her idiosyncratic defence of social discrimination in the

---

[2] Arendt as a 20th-century thinker and figure was the subject of a large exhibition at the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) in Berlin in 2020 and its comprehensive accompanying catalogue: Dorlis Blume, Monika Boll, Raphael Gross (eds.), *Hannah Arendt und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Piper, 2020). In addition, Hannah Arendt's life against the backdrop of her times was the object of a graphic novel by Ken Krimstein: *The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). Wolfram Eilenberger presents a portrait of Arendt as a paradigmatic woman of the 20th century (alongside Simone de Beauvoir, Ayn Rand, and Simone Weil) in his *Feuer der Freiheit. Die Rettung der Philosophie in finsteren Zeiten 1933-1943* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2020). An essential source for all these latest endeavours is the 1982 biography by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. Leben, Werk und Zeit* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1996).

[3] The exchange can be seen on YouTube and—as of July 2021—had been viewed more than one million times. It can be found in transcription as 'Television Interview with Günter Gaus' in: *Hannah Arendt, Ich will verstehen. Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk* (Munich: Piper, 1998), 44-70. Hereafter referred to as GG.

context of her confrontation with the state's desegregation measures at schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. It is also a central element of her major works *Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *On Revolution*. Her conviction that the development of human dignity depends on plurality determines her concept of the public sphere and her distinction between power and domination; it motivates Arendt's critique of modern labour society as well as her aversion to the equation of sovereignty and freedom, and the pull of fraternity. It is just as present in her early critique of assimilation as it is in her later work on thought and judgment. In short: Arendt's texts can essentially be read as contributions to an 'apologia of plurality.'[4]

If we lift Arendt's conceptual network up from the side of plurality, however, not only does the coherence of her entire oeuvre become clear, but the concept of plurality also gains in complexity through all the various illuminations and references. As I hope to show in the following, this opens up perspectives onto Hannah Arendt's work which turn out to be relevant in the context of current debates, not least because they allow to argue with and against Arendt. That Arendt's writings invite us to just such readings—that argue with the author against the author—is not due to the wealth of her ideas alone but to the quality of the author's presence within them as well. The latter counteracts the thoughtless adoption of the theses and challenges the reader to take an active stance instead. Moreover, it makes clear that the theme of plurality also manifests itself in the way Arendt understood her publications as well as her own public role.

Perhaps one comes closest to her understanding of herself as a public intellectual when she gives the intellectual profile of another. In her 'Thoughts about Lessing', originally delivered upon receiving Hamburg's Lessing Prize in 1959, she draws a picture of Lessing in whose contours one can recognize those of Arendt herself. Here Lessing is characterized as someone who spoke to others even as he withdrew to think.[5] Thinking, which the Western philosophical tradition since Plato has mostly contrasted with action as it is associated with a withdrawal from the world,[6] is characterized in Lessing by a 'secret relationship' (TL) to action and to the world. In Arendt, this relationship did not, of course, remain secret. Her love for the world is certainly a fundamental reason why—in light of the traditionally charged relationship between philosophy and politics, thought and action—despite her studies of philosophy she did

[4] This is Matthias Bormuth's apt characterization of a lecture by Hannah Arendt on Socrates, given in 1954 and recently made available in German. Cf. Matthias Bormuth, 'Introduction', in: Hannah Arendt, *Sokrates. Apologie der Pluralität* (Berlin: Matthes-Seitz, 2016). Hereafter referred to as S.
[5] Cf. Hannah Arendt, 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing', in: *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 4ff. Hereafter referred to as TL.
[6] Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1978), 47ff.

not see herself as a philosopher, but as a political theoretician (cf. GG) whose thought had to do with the world (of action and politics) itself. Arendt's understanding of herself as a political theoretician does not, however, refer solely to the content of her thought or to its implicit relationship to the public sphere. Rather, it also gets at the idea of how this thinking appears in her writings and publicly. Here too there is a certain resonance with her characterisation of Lessing.

Even more than to his own position, Lessing, as Arendt emphasizes, was committed to the intersubjective space in which one's own position can be negotiated and thus disputed by others as well. It would be a misunderstanding to derive from this attitude an epistemological relativism or even a frivolous indifference to one's own convictions. Lessing was enormously biased and virtually obsessive in his attention to detail in the matter. But every conviction, no matter how passionately held and hard-won, was addressed to the public as the authority before which it had to defend itself; indeed, the passion of argumentation was fed in particular by this kind of address. And this corresponded to a way of thinking that, as far as its programmatically provisional results are concerned, not only reckoned with objections from expected and unexpected sides but drew its lifeblood from the possibility of such disputes. The polemical tone that sometimes characterizes Lessing's texts is, in Arendt's clearly sympathetic view, the expression not so much of any kind of dogmatism but of an awareness of the limitations of the individual's perspective (Cf. esp. TL).

Lessing was convinced that there was no such thing as one truth independent of such perspectives, but that truth can only exist through the comparison of perspectives themselves. For in a conflict of opinions, in the process of an exchange of reasons, it is possible that people's respective perspectival determinations of truth gain generality, that they become more than subjective, arbitrary determinations or mere opinions. Nevertheless, and of this Lessing was well aware, no determination of truth can cancel out the condition of finitude. Fundamentally, even generally accepted determinations remain subject to the possibility of their contestation. Nothing—including that which may establish itself as truth—is safe from this possibility, nor should it be. In this sense, Lessing was certain, truth can only gain from every kind of controversy. For every controversy has 'stimulated the spirit of investigation' and 'kept prejudice and authority in constant convulsion; in brief, [has] hindered gilded untruth from taking root in the place of truth.'[7]

---

[7] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon and How the Ancients Represented Death*, trans. Edward Calvin Beasley (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 76.

Excitement for such an 'unorthodox' (TL) or, more precisely, post-metaphysical understanding of truth connects Arendt not only with Lessing, but also, if not as explicitly, Nietzsche.[8] The same is true of her non-conformist mistrust of everything commonly held to be objective and immutable, her willingness to turn familiar perspectives and evaluations on their head, and a certain tendency towards linguistic exaggeration. In all three—Lessing, Nietzsche, Arendt—the polemical spirit feeds on the conviction that no one can ever possess truth. For the 'limited gods', as Arendt writes, citing Lessing (TL), truth is only possible in the medium of the intersubjective comparison of its perspectives: 'the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing,' Nietzsche writes in *On the Genealogy Of Morality*, 'the more complete will be our "concept" of the thing, our "objectivity."'[9] When it comes to penetrating the objectivity of the world, the individual's limited perspectives do not then appear, as philosophical tradition has often seen it, as insurmountable obstacles, but on the contrary as the only available tools for disclosing such objectivity—provided that what appears to be true from the individual's limited perspective is subjected to verification by others.

As Arendt has repeatedly pointed out, this kind of epistemological perspectivism in philosophical history goes back to Socrates. Arendt understands his comment 'I know that I know nothing' to be the expression of a deep insight into our limited perspectives as mortals. Contrary to the distinction between philosophical truth and mere opinion that has been with us ever since Plato's allegory of the cave, Arendt takes a firm stand for Socrates. For Socrates does not turn away from ordinary mortals and their opinions in the name of a supposedly higher truth but uncovers a potential for truth in opinions themselves. His *maieutics*, the Socratic art of midwifery, pushes one's conversation partner to observe their opinions in the mirror of other possible points-of-view and thus to examine their veracity. And this is precisely why Socrates was dangerous: he seduced the average citizen into engaging in philosophy—with the result that Athens' 'customary morality,' as Hegel called the Athenians' pre-critical relationship to the laws and commandments in force, disintegrated.[10] In Hegel's eyes, however, the Socratic principle is marked by a crucial flaw: Socrates' way of speaking helps to question prejudices and motivates serious reflection, but it does not lead to the positive result of a new truth, which

[8] Thus, Nietzsche remarks that Lessing was the 'most honest of theoretical man' because he 'dared to say' that 'searching for the truth meant more to him than truth itself.' Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 113.

[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carole Diethe (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 87. For a convincing defence of Nietzsche's perspectivism against the accusation of epistemological relativism, cf. James Connant, *Friedrich Nietzsche. Perfektionismus & Perspektivismus*. (Constance: KUP, 2014), 179-333.

[10] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 322.

is precisely what a proper philosophical system must claim. For Hegel, therefore, ‘philosophical science as science’ begins only with Plato.[11] Arendt too remarks that ‘from all that we know of Socrates’ impact, ... it [is] obvious that many of his listeners did not go home with a truer opinion, but with none at all’ (S64). And yet, in Socrates’ abstinence towards any determination of a positive truth resides the condition of the possibility for Socrates’ real project, namely, ‘to make all around him and first of all himself more truthful’ (S65).

This project is as philosophical as it is political. For ‘making citizens more truthful’ means improving the ‘*doxai*, the opinions that formed the political life in which [Socrates] participated’ (S49). *Doxa*, opinion, concerns what ‘appears’ to me, it encompasses how the world presents itself to the individual in their limited perspective. It is neither simply arbitrary nor something absolute and universal (cf. S47). Nevertheless, it becomes capable of truth, i.e. ‘better’, at that very moment when those citizens who represent it become truthful; in other words, at the moment they enter into a reflective relationship with their opinions. For this form of reflexivity is fed by the experience that the world appears different to others and that the truth of the *doxa* can therefore only show itself in the agreement of various perspectives.

Becoming truthful oneself then can only mean remaining oriented towards the world and the plurality that characterizes it, even in the loneliness of the thinking process in which one reviews one’s own opinions. The ‘signature of this plurality’ (S60), therefore, is shown not least in reflective interior dialogue. And in these interior dialogues, marked as they are by the implicit presence of others, the thinker, according to Arendt, cannot avoid forming their own opinion, that is, their own *doxa* (S81f.). But even such a *doxa*, developed in the solitude of self-examining dialogue, can never claim to be conclusively true. Rather, the truthfulness of reflective self-criticism is the prerequisite of a functioning, political public sphere (cf. S62) in which its results—nonetheless ‘only’ finite—must themselves first turn out to be capable of truth.

Orienting oneself to Socrates instead of Plato, the philosopher’s special position is not to be found in a substantially different approach to truth as compared to the field of opinion; after all he, too, cannot overcome the condition of finitude. Rather, it lies in a willingness to constantly question one’s own convictions and in a commitment to the plurality of opinions themselves, the comparative confrontation of which alone allows for the disclosure of truth—over and over anew. For in being dependent on just such a comparison of perspectives, truth

[11] *Ibid.* On Hegel’s critique of Socratic irony (and the possibilities of their defence against Hegel) cf. also Juliane Rebentisch, *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 91-149.

must be thought of historically and therefore as fallible. But this also means that the truth-potential of the *doxai* must repeatedly be wrested from the 'dogmatism of the *doxazein*' (S82), from the 'dogmatism of those who […] have only opinions' (ibid.). As the only place of truth, the intersubjectivity of language is at the same time the space of chatter—that is, of thoughtlessly adopted opinion. Again and again truth must be extracted from that dimension by means of questions and the reasons one gives for what is held to be true provoked by such questions in each particular case. And this is precisely what characterizes Socrates' role as the first *public intellectual*: 'The role of the philosopher does not consist […] in ruling the state, but in permanently irritating its citizens (to make use of the image Socrates himself employed: like a gadfly)' (S49).

In the Socratic model of the intellectual as a 'annoying insect' it is not difficult to see a precursor of the 'ancestor and master of all polemicism in the German language' (TL27)—Lessing. Nevertheless, Lessing's situation is fundamentally different from Socrates'. For Lessing, according to Arendt's diagnosis, was confronted with a situation where the plural public space—which, compared to that of antiquity, had lost a considerable amount of the 'power of illumination' (TL4)—in which the commonality of the world created by the public discussion of different perspectives was already on the wane (cf. TL 19ff.). This is at the same time a situation in which the shattering of established truths owes less to public discourse challenged by criticism than to the disintegration of the fragile intersubjective space in which truth can have a place at all. 'In the two-hundred years that separate us from Lessing's lifetime,' Arendt observes, 'much has changed…but little has changed for the better' (TL 10ff.): 'The world lies between people, and this in-between...is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe' (TL4). In our current moment we too must admit that in the almost sixty years since Arendt delivered this sentence little has changed for the better either.

Buzzwords like 'post-factual era' or 'alternative facts' point to the latest crisis of truth. The diagnosis they suggest, however, proves to be misleading against the background of the understanding of truth just outlined. The scandalous thing about talk of 'alternative facts' is not so much that what seems to be generally proven as fact is denied, for example that there were significantly fewer people present at Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017 than the press secretary claimed at the time, or that Joe Biden—and not Trump—won the 2020 presidential election, but that removing the false claim from the space of proof was considered possible. The scandal is not in the assertion of an alternative factual truth, but in the turning away from the space of the giving and taking of reasons where every claim to truth finds its

touchstone. And this turning away ironically takes place precisely by invoking a positivist concept of factual truth. In other words: the problem with speaking about 'alternative facts' does not have to do with 'alternative' but with 'facts'. For these are asserted without any evidence, namely, the gesture of simple fact-finding. These cases clearly have nothing to do with convincing the opposing side of the evidence of an alternative truth. On the contrary, they invalidate the opposing side as legitimate equals and discredit their claims in the field of reasons from the outset. The right to public reply—against all evidence, so to speak—is categorically denied. This can also be exemplified by the alarmingly widespread talk of a manipulative 'lying press' as well as the habit of branding political opponents as members of the 'corrupt establishment'. Here, in the discreditation of a dispute over truth, lies the outrageousness of the process: 'alternative facts' are presented as alternatives to which there are supposed to be no others. This is precisely why the positivist language of facts is always employed when the public's orientation to truth has been trampled.[12]

In this light, the diagnosis of a 'post-factual age' seems misleading as well. It not only presupposes the positivist concept of factual truth, which in the line of Socrates—Lessing—Nietzsche—Arendt must be described as part of the problem rather than part of its solution. Moreover, this diagnosis focuses on the wrong context of the problem. Political misstatements, including lies, have always existed. What is new is the fact that proving a lie no longer has major consequences because political actors deny the common space in which this could be the case. Conflicts of opinion, which disclose and keep truth—forever in a precarious state—alive, are replaced by the assertion of interests. This is a framework in which Lessing's famous

[12] This situation shows that Arendt's insight into the public character of truth should also be brought to bear in a field that she largely wanted to exclude from the possibility of contestation in her text on truth and politics: that of factual truths. (Cf. Hanna Arendt, 'Wahrheit und Politik', in: Zwischen *Vergangenheiten und Zukunft*. *Übungen im politischen Denken I* (Munich: Piper, 2012), 327-370, here esp. 339). It is true that facts can be interpreted, Arendt admits, but the 'factual material' itself, according to Arendt, is not a subject of interpretation. However, as Bruno Latour and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, for example, have recently shown in detail, even the scientific findings of fact are the result of representation and interpretation, so that they cannot be removed from the realm of reasoning either (Cf. Bruno Latour, *Das Parliament der Dinge*. *Für eine politische Ontologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009); Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Experimentalssysteme und epistemische Dinge. Eine Geschichte der Proteinsynthese im Reagenzglas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002)). Historical facts, too, can only be established within this realm. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that previously overheard voices and overlooked perspectives, as well as newly emerging documents, can sometimes lead to a reinterpretation of historical contexts which penetrates down to the level of 'factual material'. But this objection only underscores the far-reaching consequences of Arendt's insistence on a plural public sphere as a condition for the possibility of truth. Historical 'facts,' Arendt herself writes in another text, 'need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs. From this, it follows that no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt—as secure and shielded against attack as, for instance, the statement that two and two make four.' (Hannah Arendt. 'Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers' in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972)). Hereafter referred to as LP.

statement 'Let each man say what he deems truth and let truth itself be commended unto God'[13] can be used in an utterly cynical way. What in Lessing is a commitment to a pluralistically constructed public sphere 'in which there are many voices and where the announcement of what each "deems truth" both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together comprise the world' (TL30ff.) appears then as a turn not only away from truthfulness, but from the differentiation between truth and untruth at all.

The effects of such a turn—which accompany an official contempt for the world and the public sphere—are dramatic. For through this contempt not only is the question whether something is true or untrue replaced by personal interests, but such a rearrangement allows the world's common ground, in which alone its existence can be preserved, to crumble. 'History,' Arendt writes, 'knows many periods of dark times in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become…dubious' (TL11). Following Bertolt Brecht, Arendt names them 'dark times.' (ibid.)

Yet, however dark a time may be the darkness will never be total as long as there are people in the plural. Arendt emphasizes this, among other things, in her commentary on the Pentagon Papers, which document the breath-taking derealization that characterized Washington's decision-making processes in the Vietnam War—a derealization Arendt attributes primarily to the influence of PR consultants and academics on the US government who, in the name of image or theory, were accustomed to refraining from examining reality themselves. And it was above all the agents of such derealization who completely fell victim to it (cf. LP). This does not diminish the damage that can occur when such derealized consciousnesses are simultaneously endowed with the power of the state to not only interpret the world according to their own interests, but to enforce such interpretations. Nevertheless, this too can only succeed to a certain extent. For the derealized consciousness may well ignore the reality of other perspectives; but like the child that puts its hands in front of its eyes and asks 'Do you still see me?' it can never completely eliminate these perspectives through ignorance nor the probable use of violence; on the contrary, what presents itself to others is the in a certain sense laughable arrogance of an attitude which acts as if its victory in the confrontation of opinions were already a given (cf. LP). Thus, for Arendt, among other things the courage of those who we would today call whistleblowers that leaked excerpts from the Pentagon Papers to the press (as well as their publication by the *New York Times* and

[13] Cf. Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, Letter to Johann Albert Heinrich Reimarus from April 6, 1778.

Washington Post) testify to a different reality than the one the US government had created for itself.

And even today, though under the impression that the derealization of the world by a ruler cannot only take place in plain sight, but can also be normalized to a certain extent, one might point out that the arrogance which accompanies such derealization is apparently incapable of completely darkening the public sphere and the world it produces. In the USA, even during Trump's presidency, there were still elements of a democratic system in which the possibility of challenging government assertions and decisions was not only provided for but protected; there was a press that provided the interested public with material for a review of the 'alternative facts' the government had floated; and there was the opposition that, already for structural reasons, adhered to the concept of the debatability of governmental truths—and thus to a political system that provides for speech and counter-speech between opponents who take one another seriously. In dark times, however, this reality-vouching interplay between democratic institutions is no longer a given, indeed, they are under attack.[14] Increasingly—and this by no means only concerns the situation in the USA where the spectre of 'Trumpism' is anything but gone despite his having been voted from office—things today have to do with the conflict between those parties oriented towards a shared space of debate and those populists who in the name of the 'true will of the people' turn away from it. This kind of turn, along with the delegitimization of political opponents that accompanies it, can of course only be successful where, above all, the determination of that 'true will of the people' is taken to be self-evident and therefore exempt of all argumentation.[15] Concerns surrounding the possibility of open debate and thus a shared world are not only challenged by populist parties and movements, but also by the effects that 'asymmetrical polarization,' a polarization that turns against open debate as such, has had on the 'traditional' media landscape—be it that individual newspapers and radio stations no longer expect being able to convince anyone but their own clientele; be it that, under conditions of asymmetrical polarization, the old idea of neutrality in terms of the media's equal treatment of political opponents acts in favour of those who no longer have any interest in the testing of their claims in open debate and thus no interest in the institution of the press as the fourth estate.[16] Finally, concerns surrounding the loss of public space also involve

[14] On the effects of the Trump era cf. Masha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy* (New York: Riverhead, 2020).
[15] Cf. Jan-Werner Müller, *Was ist Populismus? Ein Essay* (Berlin. Suhrkamp, 2016), esp. 130.
[16] On the diagnosis of 'asymmetrical polarization' and its consequences for the way the press understands itself cf. Jay Rosen, 'Asymmetry between Major Parties Fries the Circuits of the Mainstream Press' [https://pressthink.org/2016/09/asymmetry-between-the-major-parties-fries-the-circuits-of-the-mainstream-press/] (last accessed 20.10.2020).

the explosive mixture which can occur when such a loss meets the potential of new technologies to manipulate opinion.[17]

In view of the political dangers that accompany a loss of public space, remaining at the level of public debate and merely opposing populists' alleged truths with other truths (which at the moment often occurs in a somewhat technocratic fashion) is insufficient. For Arendt, in dark times the most urgent thing is an insistence on humanity—not a fussy humanity, but a humanity a la Lessing, who gives precedence to the possibility of a controversy of opinions before the fight for (and victory of) his own opinion, its assertion as truth. 'Because Lessing was a completely political person, he insisted that truth can exist only where it is humanized by discourse […]' (TL30). For every truth will become 'inhuman in a very literal sense,' Arendt continues, the moment it evades such debatability, be that—politically—by means of violence, the only way it can be enacted, be that—philosophically—by means of its localization in an empire of ultimate ideas which has been freed from the conditions of finitude. In both cases, the result would be a 'tyranny of truth' (S44). If Arendt sides with Lessing and Socrates against Plato, that is, pleads for the use of the intellect in public debate and against the opposition of philosophy and politics, absolute truth, and mere opinion, it is not simply a matter of defending a post-metaphysical concept of truth but defending a human world at the same time. Precisely because of her partisanship in any matter—just like Lessing, Arendt in this respect was 'by no means an especially tolerant person' (TL26)—each of her interventions is directed at others' incalculably diverse positions and opinions and accompanied by the willingness to subordinate her own position to the progress of the exchange of reasons, to 'sacrifice' her own perspectival truth to the humanity of a world first formed through the differences between people (cf. TL8ff.). For Arendt and Lessing are convinced that a world in which everyone has agreed on one opinion ceases to be a world of and for humans. The same applies to a world in which no one cares about the opinions of others, a world of isolated individuals. As an intellectual in a dark time, Arendt, like her model Lessing, was driven by a kind of disquiet which can no more stand the disintegration of the public sphere than its closure, and it allowed her to be vigilant on both sides.

This is where the need for a 'new political philosophy' (S85) arises, one which would overcome the estrangement of philosophy and politics initiated by Plato by returning, as Arendt speculates at the end of her lecture on Socrates, to that wonder which stands at the beginning

[17] Cf. the impressive documentary film *The Great Hack* (USA 2019, directed by Karin Amer, Jehane Noujaim) on the role Cambridge Analytica played in the run-up to Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump.

of all philosophy. The object of such '*thaumazeins* [wonder] at what is as it is' then would have to be 'human plurality', 'from out of which the wide array of human affairs arises' (ibid.). And this is precisely the sense in which Hannah Arendt herself was a philosopher: her work can be read as a political philosophy which has its origins in wonder at human plurality.