

Phenomenology of Plurality. Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity.

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Sophie Loidolt

Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity

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Reviewed by Marieke Borren, 2020

This impressive study is the first systematic and comprehensive reconstruction of Hannah Arendt's phenomenology ever pursued. Careful not to turn Arendt into something she is not—an orthodox (that is, Husserlian) phenomenologist—Austrian philosopher Sophie Loidolt puts Arendt's work squarely within the so-called second generation in the phenomenological tradition, alongside Merleau-Ponty, Fink, Patocka, Levinas, Sartre, and more recent work in social ontology. Loidolt demonstrates how Arendt is firmly embedded in first-generation phenomenology (Husserl and Heidegger), while stressing how she transformed—that is, politicized—it through her notion of "actualized plurality," or what Loidolt calls Arendt's "core phenomenon."

Loidolt's central claim is that Arendt's conceptual work and method are less idiosyncratic and eclectic than is usually assumed (both by "modernists," who deplore its lack of systematicity, and "postmodernists," who hail it), as phenomenology provides the systematic grounding underlying her method and the key notions that inform her work, such as appearance (including the "space of appearances"), experience, world, the "who" and, above all, plurality. Loidolt's aim is to deliver a contribution to phenomenology and to political theory. She provides a corrective to exclusively empirical-political (or "ontic") readings of Arendt's work, as well as to the "modernist" and "postmodernist" families of schools in Arendt scholarship. The former includes critical theory (deliberative democracy) and other approaches in political theory that stress deliberation, association, and practical-reason-based normative justification. Loidolt takes particular issue with this school, epitomized in the work of feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib. The postmodernist family (with feminist representatives such as Bonnie Honig, Linda Zerilli, and Adriana Cavarero) include postfoundational, agonistic, and other theoretical approaches that stress performance, and usually take an aesthetic rather than a moral perspective on political matters. Postmodernists tend to be more sensitive to ontological questions pertaining to "the political," and Loidolt faults them for downplaying subjectivity.

Throughout the book, Loidolt draws (among others) on *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben* (1960). That Arendt's own German translation—or rather: reworking—of *The Human Condition* (1958) allows for a better appreciation of her phenomenological heritage than does the English-language publication is a real eye-opener.

The book consists of six chapters, divided across two parts, with part I dealing with Arendt's work and/in phenomenology, and part II with a phenomenological interpretation of plurality. Chapter 1 traces the development of the concept of plurality in Arendt's work through a close reading of two early essays in which she critically engages with phenomenology, *Existenz* philosophy, and existentialism, especially the work of her teachers Jaspers and Heidegger, along with Sartre, Camus, and the political writings of Merleau-Ponty. Loidolt's careful interpretation reveals that these essays center on the question of reality, or the "sense of the real," as Arendt calls it. By means of a *via negativa*, these essays bring out the limitations of phenomenology "with respect to capturing the manifestation of worldly reality in the encounter with others" (39). Even philosophers such as Sartre and Camus, who explicitly engage with political issues, do not take the world as the point of departure for philosophical reflection. I wondered how the work of the second-generation phenomenologists Beauvoir and Fanon in respectively feminist and postcolonial theory, could be shown to be closer to Arendt in this respect.

Along the way, Loidolt challenges the often-advanced view that Arendt's philosophical work in *The*

Human Condition (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1971/1978) was prompted foremost by the historical events she lived through, especially the advent of mass statelessness in Europe and the Holocaust. Loidolt demonstrates that preceding the rise of totalitarian regimes, Arendt's 1929 doctoral thesis on St. Augustine's concept of love (written under the guidance of Heidegger and Jaspers) already contained her basic intuitions about plurality and the worldliness of the human condition *in nuce*.

Whereas chapter 1 is primarily historical and negative, chapters 2 and 3 are more systematic and positive, demonstrating how Arendt pluralizes and politicizes the basic (that is, Husserlian and Heideggerian) "operative" phenomenological concepts of appearance, experience, and world (chapter 2) and the structures of human existence, selfhood, or subjectivity (chapter 3). Although Arendt's prioritization of appearance over being has met with appreciation among postmodernist theorists of performance for *political* reasons, Loidolt expounds the *phenomenological* basis of this gesture. At the same time, she makes the argument that Arendt's account of the human condition (or rather: of "structures of conditionality") radicalizes and exteriorizes the phenomenological first-person perspective, which Loidolt captures in the idea of "being-of-the-world." "Being-of-the-world" is removed from Husserl's transcendental subjectivity on account of its resolute anti-Cartesianism. It also radicalizes Heidegger's view of the worldliness of Dasein ("being-in-the-world"), for appearance *to others* is key to being-of-the-world. In Loidolt's interpretation, the "dative of experience," that is, the subject to which appearances appear, is pushed into the world, like "a glove turned inside out" (93). This move into the world brings Arendt into proximity with other second-generation phenomenologists, most notably Merleau-Ponty.

Chapter 3, the conceptual center of the book (as dense as it is original), proceeds by developing more fully Arendt's *enactive* phenomenological approach to intentionality, human experience, and conditionality that was introduced in chapter 2 as a complement to the existing hermeneutic-phenomenological reception of Arendt's work. This enactive phenomenology centers on the concept of *Vollzug*. The word *Vollzug* both belongs to everyday German speech and has a more technical meaning in phenomenology, drawing upon the Aristotelian concept of *energeia*. It does not correspond to a single English word, but depending on the context, it is translated as either actualizing, enacting, performing, executing, unfolding, and so on. Loidolt argues that labor, work, and action/speech are to be seen as the activities needed to enact the conditional structures of life itself, worldliness, and plurality (in chapter 5, she adds reflective judgment to speech and action as the activities that enact plurality). Each of the human activities has a particular "inner logic" that Loidolt calls "space of meaning." These spaces of meaning are dynamic and always exist in relation to one another.

Loidolt refutes Benhabib's charge that Arendt's work suffers from "phenomenological essentialism": making essentialist distinctions between the private and the public spheres on the one hand and the political and the social realms on the other. These distinctions are a longstanding target of feminist critique, even if they are not always blamed on Arendt's phenomenological heritage, most recently in Judith Butler's work, which is otherwise sympathetic to Arendt's political theory (Butler 2015). Loidolt does not follow Arendt uncritically at this point, but she argues that human activities do not have a given or natural "location"; the spaces of meaning determine how and where they may flourish and enhance their own possibilities, for example, in private or public spaces (Loidolt calls this the "excellence thesis" as opposed to the "location thesis"). The excellence thesis enables Loidolt to introduce the question of the normative ramifications of Arendt's work, a topic that receives its full elaboration in the last chapter.

Chapter 4 elaborates Arendt's concept of plurality as "political intersubjectivity," first in relation to the basic phenomenological view that subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and the world are co-constitutive and thoroughly intertwined. Loidolt demonstrates how Arendt is indebted to Husserl's treatment of intersubjectivity and Heidegger's *Mitsein* (or rather: *Miteinandersein*), being-with, especially in his 1924/25 lectures on Aristotle of which Loidolt offers a fine close reading. Second, Loidolt situates Arendtian plurality within the context of political theory and of recent intersubjective transformations of philosophy. What Arendt meant by plurality is mostly poorly understood. In mainstream political theory, including feminist and antiracist scholarship, it is often simply taken to refer to social or cultural pluralism (for example, in debates on multiculturalism, diversity policy, and identity politics), or to an ontic diversity of properties that may be quantitative or qualitative (what Arendt calls "what we are), rather than to a plurality of *perspectives*. Postfoundational theorists, on the other hand, do acknowledge the ontological radicality of plurality, yet due to their deconstructions of subjectivity, completely rule out the first-person perspective that is key to phenomenological approaches. Finally, social ontology and other recent phenomenological accounts of the self-other relation (Zahavi) neglect the political dimension of plurality.

For Arendt, plurality is both an "ontico-ontological" and an existential fact that allows for the emergence of a unique individual perspective, the "who." At the same time, plurality is more than an ontico-ontological fact, for it calls for enactment (*Vollzug*), and hence it may be realized—or not. At this point, the normative implications of Arendtian plurality come into focus again: the demand for the "we" not to be merged in a collective "I." In the final section of this chapter, Loidolt spells out six features of the who.

Chapter 5 engages in the debate on agonistic (Honig) vs. narrative (Benhabib) readings of action in Arendt scholarship and argues that a phenomenological analysis of the different layers of the who clarifies that the two models are actually related. Loidolt proceeds with a meticulous discussion of the three activities through which plurality may be actualized: the common exercise of action, speech, and reflective judgment. Taking in the phenomenological background of Arendt's appropriation of Kant's theory of reflective judgment, she puts it in a new light that I found convincing and illuminating. Finally, Loidolt shows that plurality provides the criterion for assessing the authenticity of the we: the extent to which it actualizes plurality and does not dissolve the uniqueness of each who.

Chapters 1-5 build up toward, arguably, the apotheosis of the book, chapter 6 on Arendt's "political ethics of actualized plurality," by following up on the concluding question of the previous chapter: "Why should we be interested at all in actualizing plurality?...Why should care for life and survival not clearly have more importance than any actualization of plurality?" (229-30). One of the enduring debates in Arendt scholarship concerns the alleged lack of normativity or moral foundations in her work. Loidolt argues (against Benhabib's charge of "normative melancholia," among others) that Arendt's phenomenology of plurality *does* have important normative consequences, which are best thought of as "proto-normative" demands. She retrieves an *intrinsic* ethics of the political from Arendt's work that follows from the "logic" (space of meaning) of actualized plurality itself, instead of deriving moral principles through the justificatory operations of practical reason, as adherents of deliberative democracy and political liberalism within normative political theory do. The "overall ethical principle" that Loidolt derives from Arendt's work is "endorsing everything that fosters plurality while rejecting that which flattens plurality and morally condemning that which destroys plurality" (252). Courage and trust are presented as the Arendtian ethical virtues: "the feelings and attitudes towards others which are...vitally important for the sustainment of a common world and freedom 'in concert,' are welcoming the new, keeping one's promises, and being ready to forgive" (241).

Next, Loidolt shows how for Arendt, the logic of plurality clashes with the concerns of life itself, (factual) truth, and lawgiving practical reason, to the effect of mutual deformations. Loidolt defends these controversial distinctions to a certain extent. For example, though she agrees with, among others, social justice and feminist theorists, that life itself can never be banned completely from the space of the political, she warns about the opposite: the concerns of life, by virtue of its space of meaning, have the potential to annihilate plurality. Totalitarian or authoritarian populist regimes suggest they are best equipped to solve the "mass" problems of our times--regulating "floods" of refugees, for example--and indeed they may be, but only by entirely swallowing joint political action by a plurality of people.

This chapter ends with a comparison between Arendt's politics of plurality and Levinas's ethics of alterity. Loidolt argues that this comparison may prove mutually beneficial because of their "methodological affinity," their important differences notwithstanding.

Even though Loidolt aims to offer a new reading of Arendt's work to both political theorists and (more or less orthodox) phenomenologists, I believe it will speak more directly to the latter than to the former. Granted that Loidolt does not reduce Arendt to a disciple of Heidegger, even less so of Husserl, the tacit assumption seems to be that only demonstrated parallels with these first-generation phenomenologists prove Arendt to be a true phenomenologist. This assumption seems to prevent Loidolt from drawing the radical consequences of the idea of "being-of-the-world," although she approves of Cavarero's reading of Arendt's work as a "radical form of phenomenological ontology" (64). Loidolt is completely right to stress--contra deconstructions of the subject in postfoundationalism--that self, other, and world are intertwined, so that the one cannot even exist in isolation from the others. Regrettably, the focus is somewhat out of balance. The *who* (selfhood, subjectivity, the dative of experience), even if it is pluralized, receives a disproportionate amount of attention, at the expense of the (appearing and common) *world*. Arendt held that "the *world* and the *people* who inhabit it are *not the same*" (Arendt 1968, 4). Her postmetaphysical insistence on the coincidence of being and appearance--that is, appearance to many others--translates to the ontological dignity (perhaps primacy) of the world, taken as the space of appearances, the "in between" and certainly also the *Dingwelt*, the material world that provides the stability that is needed in light of the fragility of the "second in-between" (99). Indeed, Loidolt frequently gestures to each of these aspects of the world, and she gives a tantalizing hint to the ethical appeal of the world in her last chapter, but she does not really elaborate on them to bring out what I take to be the true radicality of Arendt's phenomenology, which perhaps only Merleau-Ponty rivals.

Loidolt mostly (the last chapter is an important exception) leaves it to the reader to spell out the implications for rethinking "the political" and even more so for thinking about politics. An indication is the metaphor for Arendtian action that she uses repeatedly: making music together. Albeit a step forward with respect to Heidegger's example of choice--solitary instrument use--making music together is still a proto-political common practice at most. Adamant to stress the philosophical rather than "merely" political meaning of Arendt's work, Loidolt sometimes overstates her point with the risk of dehistoricizing it. For example, she nicely observes that for Arendt, philosophizing is

sparked by the affect of "speechless horror" ("that there once might be nothing and no one, rather than something or someone"), in addition to wonder ("that there is something rather than nothing," as Heidegger said, following Leibniz) (46). But she leaves aside the particular historical context that provoked Arendt's "speechless horror," that is, the Holocaust (after all, the quote is taken from the preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951]). I felt this was a missed opportunity to explore a truly original feature of Arendt's phenomenology, namely how concrete political (ontic) events and a radical phenomenological ontology *work together* in it. However, Loidolt has done an absolutely impressive job laying the groundwork for the task of examining the relation between the transcendental and the empirical for others to take up.

The structure and style of the book are somewhat strained. The architecture of the book creates the impression of a highly systematic argument, yet topics are addressed repeatedly and in slightly different ways, the subtlety of which are not always easy to grasp. The book is steeped in the German post-Kantian philosophical tradition that brings with it a particular, highly technical, style, and puts it at a distance from the vibrancy of Arendt's own writings that abound in concrete cases that are always more than mere illustrations for an otherwise abstract argument and hence speak to readers' lived experiences.

Still, even if it may be a challenging reading experience, especially for those not well versed in phenomenology, I found it not just well worth the effort but, moreover, highly rewarding, for the concerns mentioned above pale in comparison with Loidolt's immense achievements. The phenomenological background of Arendt's work is often invoked, but rarely seriously explored. It is therefore a major accomplishment that Loidolt teases out convincingly the consistent phenomenological inspiration of Arendt's method and conceptual apparatus. Loidolt's readings of Arendt (and other phenomenologists) are rigorous and of unsurpassed analytic depth. Lastly, this book is a truly innovative work of scholarship that generates a wealth of new insights (which is difficult to do justice to within the limited space of a review). It makes a significant contribution to the vast scholarship on Arendt and provides a new perspective on worn-out debates on the status of reflective judgment and common sense, normativity and ethics, and the debate between modernist and postmodernist readings. Even if Loidolt does not engage feminist concerns directly, she extensively discusses the work of feminist philosophers within the latter schools in Arendt scholarship. Moreover, she adds an enactive approach to the--still fairly circumscribed--phenomenological reception of Arendt's work. After reading this book, nobody should doubt any longer that Arendt's work and method belong to phenomenology, and, what's more, how she enriched it with a political vocabulary and a method that fits actualized plurality, true to the phenomenological dictum to let one's method be determined by the phenomena one studies.

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