The Review of Politics 77 (2015), 661–667.
© University of Notre Dame
doi:10.1017/S0034670515000649

Perspectives on Plurality: Redhead on Arendt

Mary G. Dietz

> There is only a perspective seeing; only a perspective "knowing"; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity," be.
>
> —F. Nietzsche

I begin with an observation of Hannah Arendt's about metaphor that bears significantly, I think, upon Redhead's endeavor to come to terms with her in chapter 3, "Hannah Arendt on Reasoning without Banisters." "The metaphor," writes Arendt, "bridging the abyss between inward and invisible mental activities and the world of appearances, was certainly the greatest gift language could bestow on thinking and hence on philosophy, but the metaphor itself is poetic rather than philosophic in origin."[1]

"Reasoning through baggage" is the not so poetic but frequently invoked metaphor that Redhead puts industriously to work in his often dense and ambitious book, enlisting six contemporary political theorists including Arendt in a project that is geared toward resolving "the problem of public reason" (3). Redhead acknowledges that contemporary political philosophers have hardly been inattentive to the idea and requirements of public reason, given the challenges pluralism poses in contemporary public life. He even allows that his purpose in *Reasoning* is to "enhance rather than displace" (18) procedural models of public reason. But the problem with theorists like Rawls and Habermas is that they fail to appreciate the full extent of the challenges presented by "twenty-first century pluralistic dilemmas" to practices of "effective public deliberation" (4). Hence political theory's task is to find new ways to "reason effectively with other members of a highly pluralistic polity" (126). This requires us to "reason through baggage," by which Redhead seems to advocate both reasoning by means of (or in the midst of) baggage, on the one hand, and arriving at something after (or at the end

Mary G. Dietz is John Evans Professor of Political Theory and Gender & Sexuality Studies, Scott Hall 601, University Place, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208 (pol-sci@northwestern.edu).

[1]Hannah Arendt, "Thinking," in *The Life of the Mind*, one-volume ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 105.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of) reasoning, on the other, depending on the context. Since *Reasoning* repeatedly emphasizes the importance of "effectiveness," however—as in achieving "effective deliberation" (4, 146, 178), allowing "effective public reasoning to transpire" (19, 170), and advancing "effective practices" of public reason (356, 181)—it seems that "reasoning through baggage" is both a cause and a consequence of public deliberation that produces the right result.

To put Redhead's master metaphor back in Arendt's context is to see it as less inclined toward "bridging" the abyss between the world of appearances and mental activities than maintaining the dominance of the latter over the former. The "pluralistic" world of baggage, those "identity-constituting forces" (1) on the other side of the abyssal divide, must not be evaded; but there is no escaping the fact that it is fraught with problems, given the multitudinous diversity of beliefs, attitudes, opinions, viewpoints, narrative histories, traditions that agitate for attention there. One gets the impression that, for Redhead, "human plurality" (5) is a fairly mixed bag, if you will. Plurality (or "pluralism") is a vibrant and a vexing feature of democracy that cannot be ignored if you are seriously concerned about arriving at the right models for effective public reasoning. Yet at the same time, whether it is curtailed or proliferating, plurality produces major difficulties that only reasoning "through" it can resolve. (It's baggage, remember, not a blessing.) Thus, Redhead refers to "the challenges plurality presents" (1); the "resultant dilemmas" it creates (4, 106); and the problems of "incommensurable cultures" (37), "loneliness" (17), "world alienation" (17), and "legitimacy" (11) it poses. He is right, I think, to recognize the impediments that "moral plurality" (47) and value pluralism, as the philosophers call it, present for liberal democracies. The problem, as I see it, is that Redhead wants to make Arendt one of his exemplary models for what it means to reason through the baggage of human plurality. But she seems to me a particularly recalcitrant recruit for the plans that his "reasoning through baggage" has for her.

Let us start with the big picture, for even a cursory acquaintance with Arendt's political theory is enough to generate the suspicion that her attachment to the world of appearances where "plurality" resides is deeply at odds with Redhead's entire deliberative democratic theoretical framework. However modified beyond Habermas and Rawls, Redhead's world picture remains committed to the priority of the normative ideal of public reason; to staging plurality as a problem, and to gearing political theory's task toward the achievement of "effective" models of public deliberation by reasoning "through" that problem (1). Redhead is nothing if not resourceful, though, in dealing with obstreperous Arendt. Chapter 3 deftly attempts to change the subject with a couple of interpretive maneuvers that sidestep the fundamental misfit between her perspective on what she calls "the play of the world"[2] and his. First Redhead loosens the grip of her political

[2]Ibid., 22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theory by familiarizing the entirety of it under the kinder, gentler rubric of "storytelling." That is a move that then allows him to cast Arendt as a "storyteller" whose writings can be mined for a rich supply of metaphors (e.g., "thinking without a banister"); models (e.g., storytelling, "judgment"); images (e.g., "pearls," the "past"); and "ideals" (e.g., representative thinking, "enlarged mentalities"). Once suitably coupled together and fitted to the task, these "pearls," says Redhead, can be "brought up to the surface" as "lessons" for reasoning our way through problems of plurality (143). One example of the coupling of these Arendtian stories, metaphors, and models has him musing on how individuals make present "something that is absent like a pearl in light of the baggage through which they invariably engage the imaginative acts [of Arendtian judgment]" (150). In another he refers to "excavated pearls" as a "form of essential baggage" that we "avoid" at our own cost (144). And he argues that "a form of banisterless thinking like Arendtian storytelling… can help to facilitate acts of reasoning through baggage" (160).

The problem, as the mixed metaphors in these passages suggest, is that even as a "storyteller" dispensing "lessons of these pearls" (161) Arendt resists Redhead's efforts to get her to reason through the baggage of plurality. Thus he is eventually forced, by the standards and criteria that constitute a perspective attuned to effective public reason, to conclude that her "multifaceted attempts to think with banisters" (which he has to translate into "Reasoning without Banisters" in the chapter title) contain a "conceptual limitation," "frequently articulated deformities," and "problems that afflict" her political thought (162, 170, 172). I do not doubt that there are limitations in Arendt's political theory; but I think the ones that Redhead identifies are largely of his own making. To see why, I want to shift perspectives on Arendt's understanding of plurality from a position that sees "reasoning through baggage" to one that sees through "the world of appearances" instead.

Because Redhead begins from a position that privileges "reasoning" and takes plurality as "baggage," he seems to assume that Arendt does too. Hence she "compels us to publicly reason in the present," he says, "with the help of a disparate array of elements of pasts that are part of our collective baggage" (137). There are more than a few discordant notes sounding there under the drumbeat of "reasoning through baggage." Unwittingly, perhaps, Redhead seems to have cast Arendt in the role that she so often assigns to some purveyors of the tradition of political philosophy for whom the "truths of reasoning" at the farthest remove from the world of appearances compel agreement with the force of mathematical necessity, quelling "all qualities given to our senses."[3] Because he misses this, Redhead seems unable to appreciate the extent to which Arendt wishes to turn the tables

[3]Ibid., 60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on political philosophy with its "enmity against all politics,"[4] as she once put it, by establishing political theory's ("theory conceived for the purpose of political action")[5] hierarchical predominance over the *vita activa*. She elaborates upon this sensibility in the introduction to *The Life of the Mind* in the course of noting "certain doubts that had been plaguing" her since the publication of *The Human Condition*:

> I had been concerned with the problem of Action, the oldest concern of political theory, and what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections… namely, *vita activa*, was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective.[6]

Something nefarious is afoot in Arendt's reckoning about the coinage of the very terminology of *vita activa* by those devoted men,[7] for whom *vita contemplativa* rules over the less dignified activities that bear upon "the problem of Action." As we know, Arendt tackles the mental activities, which she consistently characterizes as withdrawn from the world, in *The Life of the Mind*. But she had already articulated her concerns from the other side of the table in *The Human Condition*, a perspective-altering effort to wrest command over "all kinds of being alive" from philosophy's grip by contesting the rule it had imposed over *vita activa* from its very inception.[8] The gambit behind Arendt's rhetorical seizure of "political theory" is a way of showing what it means to accord *vita activa* dignity in its own right. The very purpose of this maneuver is to displace the viewpoint that accords primacy to the philosopher's contemplative desire to subordinate "Action" to the demands of knowledge, however elevated (*sophia*) or mundane (*techne*) those demands may be. So when Redhead observes, in critiquing Arendt's "political vision," that "political action" is not able to be "actualized" until the "social problematics" that impede it are thought through, he's replicating the very maneuver that Arendt is attempting to resist by reclaiming the priority of politics over the mental activities that seek to subordinate political action to their rule (166). (He may also be forgetting, to quote the poet James Richardson: "Nothing important comes with instructions.")

Now, to be sure, Arendt's point is not that the *vita contemplativa* has nothing to do with what she calls "the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives."[9] Were it so, the absence of thought

[4]Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1945*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 2.

[5]Hannah Arendt, "Willing," in *The Life of the Mind*, 216.

[6]Arendt, "Thinking," 6.

[7]Arendt, "Willing," 198.

[8]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 17.

[9]Arendt, "Thinking," 71.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the inability to arrive at provisional judgments would present no dangers for human affairs. When Redhead addresses the significance that "representative thinking as a cornerstone of an understanding of judgment" plays in her thought (170), he rightly recognizes this. But I do not think he sees, as that passage limns "judgment" into "an act involving a plurality of voices… by which deliberators can come to present to themselves the baggage that other unique participants might bring with them to a specific act of public reasoning," just how much of a distortion of Arendt's perspective is required in order to render it compatible with Redhead's perspective of public reason. What should we make of a translation that turns her notion of "speakers of words and doers of deeds" into "deliberators" with baggage, and "spaces of appearance" into "specific acts of public reasoning"?

Ironically, perhaps, it is precisely the dominative control of his own master metaphor's struggle with baggage that prevents Redhead from seeing with acuity the mental activity that is actually closest to politics for Arendt. "Common-sense" reasoning, she says, is "guaranteed by the fact of plurality" and manifest in "the realness given by the senses playing together."[10] Although he makes some occasional allusions to "common sense," one might have thought that Redhead would have found in Arendt's notion of "common-sense reasoning" an enormously appealing alternative to the neo-Kantian models he finds lacking, especially given her mildly admonishing riposte to the philosopher for failing to see that reason, as the faculty of speculative thought, "does not move in the world of appearances" as does common sense and "hence can produce non-sense and meaninglessness but neither illusion nor deception."[11] But Redhead's perspective of public reason does not really accord the world of appearances much significance beyond its being there, like baggage, in a mode that requires reasoning through. And because reasoning through is for him a means to achieve more "effective deliberation" (146), Redhead (like Arendt's Kant) cannot imagine it in terms of common sense either. For Arendt, on the other hand, following Aristotle, deliberation is the "element of reason in choice" that is tied to the intellect in seeking a "means" toward an end.[12] That is not the same thing as common sense, which, as Arendt says, "makes us at home in the world… there we are and no questions asked."[13] (Likewise there are no "means" to be sought for achieving anything "effective.")

Of course these differentiations among reasoning, deliberation, intellect, common sense, and choice call up Arendt's so-called methodological commitment to making distinctions. Behind this (oft-disparaged) inclination of hers is another one: not to surrender to a world in which "the words we have in

[10]Arendt, "Thinking," 64.
[11]Ibid.
[12]Arendt, "Willing," 62.
[13]Arendt, "Thinking," 59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

common" no longer possess "an unquestionable meaningfulness." Rather we must reactivate our capacity "to live verbally" and "understand a world common to us all." That conviction about the common world arises partly out of her irritation with academic social science's blurring of "tyranny," "authority," and totalitarianism."[14] But not just that. More deeply, it emerges from the experience of what she calls the "speechless horror"[15] of totalitarianism, along with the very real sense that our capacity to recognize the delusion of human omnipotence born of "organized and terrorized public opinion" hinges on understanding that factuality itself "depends for its continued existence upon the existence of a nontotalitarian world."[16] Viewed in this historical context, which I think it is imperative to remember, Arendt's political theory, especially perhaps *The Human Condition*, can be seen as nothing less than an effort to initiate the promise of a new beginning for the nontotalitarian "common world," by mobilizing the power of words along with imagination, which alone, as she says, "enables us to see things in their proper perspective."[17] Perhaps we can fit "storytelling" into this endeavor too; but not without recognizing that what really counts for Arendt is the perspective seeing that takes its bearing from the common world, along with the fact that the "past events" Redhead sees her "story" telling (142) include for the human condition one very real catastrophic horror enacted in order "to eliminate forever certain 'races' from the surface of the earth."[18]

Alone of the words that help Arendt identify the basic existential conditions of human life on earth, "plurality" signifies what she calls "the sameness in utter diversity" of living beings whose "simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives" paradoxically guarantees the appearance of a world common to us all.[19] The failure to perceive plurality undermines the human condition for, as Arendt puts it, "the end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective."[20] More exactly, "plurality" invests the world with everything that totalitarianism, with its "iron band of terror," crushed in human beings—"as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions."[21] Plurality is the living spirit of the "We," the

[14]Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Books, 2006), 95–96.

[15]Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 58.

[16]Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 388.

[17]Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 323.

[18]Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 277.

[19]Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57.

[20]Ibid., 58.

[21]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 466.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000649 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"law of the earth," and the heart of the perspective of the common world.[22] Equally so, plurality is the indispensible condition for the appearance and survival of the "enduring I," "'the whole dear notion of one's own self,'" "the disclosure of the 'who' through speech," and "the setting of a new beginning through action."[23] Totalitarianism destroys plurality in striving toward a system in which "men are superfluous" and obliterating, through its camps of extermination, first the juridical, and then the moral, and finally the "unique identity" of every individual person.[24] *The Human Condition* is, I think, Arendt's magnificent redemptive protest against this speechless horror in the name of common sense, for love of the common world, from the perspective of the world of appearances, enacted as political theory.

I hope the gravity of these ruminations justifies the circuitous route I have taken before returning in conclusion to Redhead's effort to cull from Arendt lessons for conceptualizing "how effective reasoning through baggage can transpire" given the "problems of plurality" (170). This may well be a meaningful and coherent concern from the perspective of public reason. Hence, along the lines of homo faber's "how to" problem-solving standards of judgment, Redhead can fault Arendt for not giving us adequate enough means for how best to "interrogate our own identity, how precisely we reason through and with the baggage that is closest to us"; and "how it is that our self goes about imagining possible alternative selves" (152). But from the perspective of the common world there is no such thing as reasoning "through" plurality toward means that help us achieve models of "effective deliberation." Nor is plurality a grab bag full of problems pertaining to "identity-constituting forces." From the viewpoint of the common world, "identity" is the constitutive power of self-revelation in the disclosure of "who somebody is"; and plurality is "the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all."[25] The appearance of "who we are" is made possible in the world by the action and speech of human beings as plurality, not by reasoning through baggage.

From Arendt's perspective, one of the beauties of human affairs in the spaces of appearances she calls politics is the enormous richness and diversity of perspectives that come to light. The same holds true for political theory. So I am not suggesting that Redhead's perspective on her work should accede to the one that I have been calling the perspective of the world of appearances. (That might, paradoxically, betoken the end of the common world). Still, a political theorist does not have to surrender his or her own perspective to that of another in order to see how another perspective "sees" and perhaps even unsettles one's own "perspective seeing" toward the theories and the theorists who inhabit our common world.

[22]Arendt, "Thinking," 19.
[23]Arendt, "Willing," 195–98; *Human Condition*, 184.
[24]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 457, 452–53.
[25]Arendt, *Human Condition*, 244.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000649 Published online by Cambridge University Press