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PLURALITY, NORMATIVITY, AND THE BODY: RESPONSE TO SANJA BOJANIĆ AND ADRIANA ZAHARIJEVIĆ

ABSTRACT

The first part of the text is a précis of the monograph *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity*, a phenomenological analysis of Arendt's core notion of plurality that unites the fields of phenomenology, political theory, social ontology, and Arendt studies. In the second, larger part, the author responds to the comments given by Sanja Bojanić and Adriana Zaharijević, in order to clarify some key concepts and positions presented in the book.

KEYWORDS

Hannah Arendt,
phenomenology,
political philosophy,
plurality,
intersubjectivity

Précis

Phenomenology of Plurality is an in-depth, phenomenological analysis of Arendt's core notion of plurality that unites the fields of phenomenology, political theory, social ontology, and Arendt studies to offer new perspectives on key concepts such as intersubjectivity, selfhood, personhood, sociality, community, and conceptions of the "we".

The title of the book combines two of its central claims: first, that Arendt is rightfully counted within the phenomenological tradition for having developed her own phenomenology of plurality; and second, that the theme of human plurality harbors philosophical implications that transform the classical phenomenological framework as well as central notions of Western philosophical discourse.

The book aims to show that Arendt's notion of plurality requires a phenomenological in-depth explanation to be fully understood in its significance and consequences. Hence, instead of portraying Arendt's philosophical background as a mixture of idiosyncratically interpreted influences from Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger, or others, one central thought that Arendt pursues through her entire life, is closely and systematically developed: *the actualization of plurality in a space of appearances*. One of the main organizing ideas of the book is to show that the hidden methodology that allows Arendt to conceptualize plurality in this explicit framework derives from the phenomenological tradition. At the same time, doing so transforms this methodology along with its

central notions such as intentionality, appearance, first-person-perspective, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and world. Thus, without trying to frame Arendt as a phenomenologist exclusively, *Phenomenology of Plurality* promotes a new understanding of the concept of plurality by contextualizing it within the phenomenological tradition.

This also entails an enactive approach to plurality, another central theme of the book: The claim here is that plurality is not something that simply *is*, but essentially something we have to take up and *do*. Therefore, it manifests itself only as an *actualization of plurality in a space of appearances*. This figure is taken to be the “core phenomenon” that presents the key to Arendt’s related concepts of action, freedom, and the political, as well as to her new understanding of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and a distinct form of the “we” in a political sense.

After an exposition of the overall approach in the introduction, the first part of the book (Part I) starts out with a short overview of how the topic of plurality emerged in Arendt’s work in the context of Existenz philosophy (Chapter 1). It then proceeds to a systematical analysis of the major phenomenological concepts that are involved in and transformed by its further elaboration: appearance, experience, and world (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 continues to spell out explicitly the “hidden methodology” that is at work in Arendt’s main philosophical work, especially through a reading of *The Human Condition*. Arendt’s analysis of the dynamic relations between basic conditions (i.e. life, worldliness, plurality) and basic activities (i.e. labor, work, action) is interpreted as an analysis of “dynamic spaces of meaning”. This also involves a treatment of her phenomenological theory of the spaces of the public and the private along those lines (Chapter 3). All these issues relate to the actualization of plurality and thus, the political. The second part of the book hence explicitly turns to this topic and maps the terrain for a phenomenological theory of political subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Chapter 4). In a close investigation of Arendt’s privileged activities of speaking, acting, and judging, the architectonics of “actualizing a plural we” are discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Finally, the book closes by proposing an ethics of actualized plurality (Chapter 6), which understands itself as a political ethics and contests the oft-raised argument that Arendt’s philosophy lacks “moral foundations”. Usually, this alleged lack is compensated by correcting Arendt’s approach to Kantian themes like reason and judgment with a Frankfurt-school interpretation. The book takes a different direction: The argument is that Kantian themes are important for Arendt, but precisely in terms of a transposition into a phenomenological-existential framework. Freedom, spontaneity, judgment, and humanity are given a reading by Arendt that translates them into the domain of appearances, including also the dimension of withdrawal within appearance. This opens up a different ethical perspective than the reason- and discourse-focused Habermasian approach to Kant, and brings Arendt in a possible dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas’ alterity ethics.

By highlighting these aspects, this book proposes a third productive way of profiting from Arendt’s work beyond the two dominant contemporary directions

of Habermasian and poststructuralist approaches. While an overly aesthetic or postmodern take on Arendt misses her deep concern with political ethics and thus the true intentions of her “care for the world”, a modernist interpretation too close to discourse ethics fails to make good on the inventive potential of Arendt’s phenomenological reflections. The book intends to overcome both shortcomings by systematically developing a phenomenology of plurality that binds together the features of first-person perspective in the plural, the narrative, interpersonal and interactive emergence of personhood, and a shared space of appearance that has its own logic and rationality.

Responses to Sanja Bojanić and Adriana Zaharijević

Let me first express my sincere thanks to Sanja Bojanić and Adriana Zaharijević for engaging so thoroughly and thoughtfully with my work. While I entirely agree with Sanja Bojanić’s perceptive analysis of placing plurality into the philosophical tradition (Bojanić 2020), I also very much appreciate the link to Judith Butler’s work elaborated by Adriana Zaharijević (2020). It is true, as Bojanić works out, that my main focus lies on the dialogue with phenomenological approaches with the clear aim to “politicize” it as much as possible – and to go beyond it with Arendt (or sometimes also without her) where this is not possible anymore. Interestingly, it seems that Judith Butler’s early work is also marked by a deep examination of the writings of the French phenomenological and existentialist tradition, first and foremost Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre (cf. Butler 1986, 1987). Butler is hence not only a careful and critical reader of Hannah Arendt, but also of a much broader range of texts of the phenomenological tradition and, given that she even repeatedly alludes to Emmanuel Levinas’ work in her recent texts dealing with vulnerability and alterity (cf. Butler 2004), would make an investigation into her differentiated relations with phenomenology over the development of her work an interesting topic.

In my book, I’ve limited myself to some allusions and footnotes. It is true, as Zaharijević notes, that I present a phenomenological reading of Arendt in its differences with respect to a poststructuralist conception of subjectivity, action, and the political. But I hope to have made clear that I very much have complementary or communicative differences in mind. While the poststructuralist approach focuses more on how discourse and institutions “form” subjects, the phenomenological approach looks at how these structures are experienced and lived, without denying that such formations take place, and without claiming that a sovereign subject is master over all meaning-constitution (in fact, I think that Husserl never claimed that either). I think that much has been done in this direction already under the heading of “critical phenomenology”, and I would hope that my book on Arendt could further contribute to that kind of discourse. I’m convinced that it is important to integrate the insights into subjectivation and subject-formation by poststructuralist authors such as Foucault and Butler into the phenomenological discourse, in order to make phenomenology

sensitive to power-structures. At the same time, I think that if we want to conceptualize action properly and politically in an Arendtian sense, we also need to hold on to the first-person perspective, in the singular as well as in the plural.

As for Butler's later work, I have only alluded to how her notion of vulnerability could connect to a more benevolent reading of the role of the givenness of the body in Arendt's writings. Again, important work has been done here already by Peg Birmingham (2006) and Serena Parekh (2008) who have both argued (with different nuances) that Arendt does explicitly care about a protection of life in all its vulnerability. I have added to this line of thought, arguing that if life is the dark ground from which we rise into the brightness of the world—without ever “departing” from that ground but rooting and dwelling in it—then it is an explicitly *political* issue to foster and protect this vulnerability of life in all its potentials to unfold (cf. Loidolt 2018: 145). In my case, this interpretation is probably more indebted to a Levinasian perspective I deliberately read into Arendt than to a Butler-inspired take on the issue. But of course, it connects to Butler's works. I prefer to take my path via phenomenology, simply because it has not entirely become clear to me where and how these seemingly ontological elements of vulnerability (or of a “social ontology” as Zaharijević repeatedly mentions) emerge in Butler's thought and how they connect to her earlier work. One further complication – which I also regard as a fruitful one – is that in Butler's work, the Hegelian elements of “desire” and “recognition” play an important operative role. It is remarkable, however, that Arendt completely avoids any recognition-talk with respect to plurality (cf. Markell 2003). These are definitely further topics to think about.

Another topic I would like to focus on here in my response, since both Sanja Bojanić and Adriana Zaharijević have thankfully addressed it, is that of “spaces of meaning.” I have tried to create this term (with several references to phenomenological debates and authors) in order to establish a more differentiated reading of the interrelational and dynamic meaning-constitution in Arendt's (not always clear) talk of “activities” and “conditions”. As Zaharijević notes, I have myself offered to read this as a phenomenological counterpart to the conception of the dispositive. Normativity, as she rightly demands, is integrated into that concept, often as a lived and operative one. My aim is to show that normativity is not only discursive but also forms the spaces in which we meaningfully move. At the same time, I draw on Arendt to show that activities, and especially activities done together, also contribute to the formation of such spaces of meaning: they alter them and bring them into a certain dynamic. There is, however, a stronger sense of normativity in Zaharijević's reading of spaces of meaning than I intended it to be. I rather use it as a descriptive tool to demonstrate certain inherent normativities. How, for example, does the space of meaning of “indifference,” or that of “addiction” look like? (I just use one keyword of a “constellation” here which would have, of course, to be differentiated into many different aspects of this formation.) Not conforming to norms hence, in my opinion, does not throw people out of spaces of meaning and makes them unintelligible, but rather includes them in a peculiar, “queer”

(let me just shortly point to Sara Ahmed's [2006] work with this allusion), maybe harmful way. I recognize that this could be elaborated further, and confess that I did not go into the direction of what would be a "right life" in the "wrong space" or the "right space"—or which kind of space it would demand at all, for that matter. The only hint I give in an Arendtian vein is that the actualization of plurality is one form of creating a space where the qualities of plurality can unfold, in acting, speaking, and judging, in forgiving and promising. As fragile as they are, and as apparently "luxurious" in comparison to the urgent needs of life, only they can guarantee that life is not measured and brought under economic, utilitarian, and ultimately totalitarian conditions.

Zaharijević rightly points to the conditions to enter that space, to discrimination on basis of gender or other factors, and to the related question of the public and the private. I have made clear in the book that I think one would need to go beyond Arendt in her setup of the political, if rooted in quasi-essentialist conceptions of "the public" and "the private". However, I think that Arendt can be read in a much more dynamic way. Spaces of meaning can change and can be changed. That women and slaves have been banned to the household is not an essential truth neither of women nor slaves, nor of households. Rather, its consequences speak to the correlation of a diminished space of appearance with the status as a human being: "*Of course*" women and slaves are not fully recognized as humans if they are locked in the household and are denied participation in the public; and "*of course*" we do not recognize refugees as fully human if we let them vegetate in detention centers where they are in a limbo of everything: legal status, having a home, and political participation. I don't read Arendt's "of course" as an affirmation of the situation but rather as a bitter form of stating facts about how appearance granted in a society directly correlates with political, personal, and human status (and the discomfort with this wording might have to do with Arendt's "tone," unavoidable for herself but a problem also for readers of her Eichmann-book, as she states in the famous interview with Günter Gaus, cf. Arendt 1994).

As for "bodiless acting," however, I have tried to show that this really goes against a consequent reading of Arendt herself (maybe even against her own grain). Instead, I have argued that all these borders between public and private, life and plurality, run *through* ourselves, since we are *bodily beings in a world and together with others*. It is simply impossible to separate these aspects from one another, they are always there concomitantly. Only in analysis, and for the sake of the clarification of different intentionalities (and consequently for a dynamics of spaces of meaning in the intersection of these different intentionalities), does such a separation make sense. But as much as I think that Arendt undertakes this analysis, I do not think that she wants to say that these spheres are separated in "real life". This might be a political intention, but all intentions in the world cannot change the fact that we, e.g. get tired after some time of acting together, that we have aging bodies even as highly important public figures, and still different voices in private, even as highly unimportant and non-publicly appearing figures.

I claim that “visibility spaces” can enhance or diminish forms and characters of appearance, but not that they “create” them in an essentialist manner. Furthermore, I see Arendt not as someone who wants to deny that we have a body when we act politically but rather as someone who wants to put things in the “right order”, since the fragile actualizations of plurality would otherwise be totally overrun by all urgent needs of life (and be treated in the form of “masses”). One can, of course, also criticize this normatively loaded approach (a normativity that grounds, as I try to show, in a certain phenomenology); but it is something different to claim that the body is not relevant at all or to claim that every bodily/social/economic need has to be integrated with the demands of actualizing and upholding plurality.

Finally, I also think that plurality has an anarchic component, and that it is “always already” there – if it is not totally attacked, suppressed, and destroyed as, for example, in the concentration camps. Plurality does not wait for a space to be built for it, according to the plans of philosophical reasoning – or political theory, for that matter. This is why, as Bojanić rightly states, plurality cannot be captured fully by any political schools of thought. It happens as people demand that space, as something new spontaneously emerges.

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Sofi Lojdolt

Pluralnost, normativnost i telo: odgovor Sanji Bojanić i Adriani Zaharijević

Apstrakt

Prvi deo teksta je *précis* monografije *Fenomenologija pluralnosti: Hanah Arent o političkoj intersubjektivnosti*, fenomenološke analize pluralnosti kao središnjeg pojma kod Arent koji ujedinjuje polja fenomenologije, političke teorije, socijalne ontologije i studija o Arent. U drugom i dužem delu, autorka odgovara na komentare Sanje Bojanić i Adriane Zaharijević kako bi razjasnila neke od ključnih pojmova i pozicija predstavljenih u knjizi.

Ključne reči: Hana Arent, fenomenologija, politička filozofija, pluralnost, intersubjektivnost

