

# Plurality and the potential for agreement: Arendt, Kant, and the “way of thinking” of the world citizen

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According to a prominent interpretation of Hannah Arendt's theory of judgment, Arendt was not concerned with the issue of disagreement or the problem of securing consensus. Linda Zerilli has recently argued that Arendt displays a stunning indifference to the question of how we are to adjudicate among competing political opinions in a pluralist society (2016, p. xii). For Zerilli, the charge leveled by Habermas—that Arendt fails to provide us with normative criteria for resolving disagreements—loses its force when we realize that Arendt did not think this task necessary for an account of democratic judgment. To date, however, no one has engaged with Zerilli on this point. In this article I argue that Arendt *does* in fact have something to say about the issue of disagreement and consensus, and that we can discern what this is if we properly appreciate the relationship between her account of plurality and her theory of judgment, especially the way in which the former underpins the latter. To this end, I show that plurality for Arendt must be understood as a normatively laden notion, one that has its basis in Kant's *Anthropology*—a text that has been neglected in Arendtian scholarship but is of considerable importance for understanding central concepts in her political thought.<sup>1</sup>

Kant defines pluralism in opposition to egoism as “the way of thinking in which one is not concerned with oneself as the whole world, but rather regards and conducts oneself as a mere citizen of the world” (p. 18). Arendt sees in this rather striking claim an injunction to consider the views of others in forming my own judgments. The requirement to take into account a plurality of perspectives functions as the beginning of an answer to the question of what we are to make of the sheer variety of perspectives which face us: in exchanging our ideas with others and imagining what it is like for them to hold the views that they do, we allow a space to be opened up between deep disagreement, on the one hand, and complete agreement, on the other. This means that we are always better off, even when we fail to reach consensus and persist in our disagreement. Such a position allows for a robust response to the charge that Arendt lacks the resources needed to say that some positions are better than others, even though it falls short of the Habermasian ideal that consensus be guaranteed.

My discussion proceeds as follows. I begin by presenting an overview of the issue of adjudication in Arendt's theory of judgment from Habermas to Zerilli (Section 1). Central to Arendt's theory of judgment is the idea that political judgments do not involve making truth claims but instead consist in disclosing our opinions amidst a plurality of others. For Arendt's critics, the effort to preserve plurality effectively removes any mechanism by which agreement and consensus could be reached. For this reason, I turn to the issue of plurality in Arendt (Section 2). After providing an exposition of the notion of pluralism in Kant's *Anthropology*, I demonstrate that plurality, for Arendt, is likewise not merely a factual notion but, crucially, a normative one as well, which enjoins us to take up a particular attitude in our

thinking. I then show how the foregoing understanding of plurality gives us a substantive answer to the question of what Arendt makes of disagreement (Section 3). I argue for a cluster of claims that show that Arendt's position is not as vulnerable as her critics suggest, even if it is more modest than they would prefer. Arendt does not celebrate disagreement, though she is also not opposed to agreement as such—only in contexts in which it is coerced.<sup>2</sup> Further, the distinct normativity of judgment means that we can contend over our opinions, though never compel another to agreement. Agreement and successful persuasion are thus possible, but in no way guaranteed. Most importantly, irrespective of whether or not agreement is reached, the very act of imaginatively representing the world from other people's points of view helps to overcome egoism and preserve plurality. I conclude by considering a recent view that reads Arendt as a proceduralist for whom at least some consensus could be guaranteed, after which I indicate some of the consequences of my account (Section 4).

## 1 | TRUTH, JUDGMENT, AND ADJUDICATION

Arendt famously appropriates Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment for political purposes, for she sees in its non-cognitive structure and unique intersubjective validity a model for the type of claim that places a demand on others without appealing to truth to settle the matter coercively (Arendt, 1982). Kant defines the faculty of judgment *in general* as "the faculty of thinking of the particular as contained under the universal," and distinguishes between its determining and reflecting use (1790/2001, p. 66). Judgment is determining if there is a universal (a concept or rule) given prior to our encounter with a particular that dictates how we are to subsume it. In making a determining judgment, we predicate something of an object, saying something about what it is like. The presence of criteria makes these kinds of judgments truth-apt; they will either be true or false. By contrast, reflecting judgments occur when no universal is given under which to subsume a particular, leaving us to deal with it in all its particularity. In such cases we make a claim about the way we, as subjects, are affected by the object; our judgment is grounded in a feeling—albeit one we presume we share with others.

Aesthetic judgments are the paradigm case of reflecting judgment, for Kant. Notably, even in the absence of rules or standards to guide us in our apprehension of a particular object, Kant attributes to them their own universality and necessity. When I judge something to be beautiful, I expect everyone will experience the same pleasure I do—as if beauty were a property of the object. I demand the agreement of others, not allowing myself to be content if you do not share my judgment. This is rooted in the presupposition that there is something we all share as human beings that can explain why we all should judge in the same way, which Kant calls common sense (*sensus communis*) and Arendt renders as community sense. For both, this is what provides our judgments with their intersubjective validity.

It is in Kant's remarks on taste that Arendt finds a way of thinking about judgment as a distinctively political faculty. It is a specific mental activity that we take up "when we are confronted with something which we have never seen before and for which there are no standards at our disposal" (Arendt, 2005, p. 102). In making these kinds of judgments one can never compel anyone to agree with them: "one can only 'woo' or 'court' the agreement of everyone else" (Arendt, 1982, p. 72). In using the language of wooing and courting, Arendt refers to what the Greeks called *peithein*—a form of persuasion that rejects all violence and coercion just as it rejects as a purpose of dialogue the pursuit of truth (2018, p. 182).

Arendt is driven by "the insight that for men, living in company, the inexhaustible richness of human discourse is infinitely more significant and meaningful than any One Truth could ever be" (1968, p. 234). Truth, for Arendt, operates with a notion of validity that neither requires nor cares about the existence of others; it precludes debate, which is "the very essence of political life" (1968, p. 241). Indeed, she views the attempt to treat political opinions as truth claims as a threat to plurality:

*The shift from rational truth to opinion implies a shift from man in the singular to men in the plural ... [where] nothing counts except the "solid reasoning" of one mind to a realm where "strength of opinion" is determined by the individual's reliance upon [others]. (1968, p. 233)*

Our aim is not to convince others that they are wrong, for there is no truth to be discovered.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we put forward our perspective in the presence of others, attempting to persuade them. Such an activity involves giving “an account—not to prove, but to be able to say how one came to an opinion and for what reasons one formed it” (Arendt, 1982, p. 41).

With Arendt’s focus on reflecting rather than determining judgment, the issue of agreement surfaces in a specific way—as it relates to the *status* of what we are disagreeing about. Determining judgments can always, in principle, be settled by appealing to rules. Consider, for example, the paradigm cases of mathematics and logic, where consensus can be compelled “on penalty of irrationality” (Ferrara, 2008, p. 22). In reflecting judgment no such rules exist; we lack determinate criteria for settling the matter of what counts as beautiful or just, disgusting or unfair. Here, not only does the nature of the disagreement differ from disagreement about matters of truth, but so does the prospect of resolution.

The issue of establishing the validity of our judgments is one of the counts on which Arendt has been most criticized. Jürgen Habermas has taken issue with Arendt’s attempt to ground political claims in something other than truth. Arendt fails to provide “a cognitive foundation” for politics and public discourse, Habermas contends, creating “a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion,” which “cannot be closed with arguments” (1977, p. 23). By relegating political judgment to the realm of “opinion and convictions that cannot be true or false in the strict sense,” Habermas argues, we are left only with the mere exchange of subjective preferences for which no rational arguments can be given (p. 23). Without a rational procedure for adjudicating competing claims and resolving conflicting opinions, which he sees as fundamental to political discourse, there can be no guarantee that we will achieve consensus in matters of politics.

The cornerstone of Habermas’s theory of communication is the idea that “all speech . . . is oriented towards the idea of truth” (1970, p. 372). Underlying any kind of speech at all is the expectation that consensus can be reached. Habermas is chiefly concerned with how conversational partners reach agreement through an examination of the validity of their respective speech acts. And despite being indebted to what he calls Arendt’s “communications concept of power,” which consists in “the formation of a *common* will in a communication directed to reaching agreement,” Habermas finds that Arendt’s account of collective will formation lacks a rational basis (Habermas, 1977, p. 4).<sup>4</sup> Habermas conceives of a mode of discourse in which we are rationally obligated to assent (take a “yes” position) upon encountering the compelling but “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas, 1996, pp. 103, 306; 1998, p. 37). This process is not violent in its compulsion, he thinks. Rational persons will be motivated solely by the strength of the best argument; their sole concern being “a cooperative search for the truth” (Habermas, 1984, p. 25; see also pp. 24, 28, 36, and 42).

If Habermas is right about Arendt, then discussing our disagreements could never amount to anything more than taking stock of the plurality of views held by members of our political community. For Habermas it follows from the claim that judgments are not cognitive that they can be nothing more than a matter of one’s personal feelings and impressions. Wooing and courting are too weak to guarantee consensus; any consensus that happens to arise is ultimately arbitrary and groundless. We are thus resigned to “an impenetrable pluralism of apparently ultimate value orientations,” in which “it is impossible to separate by argumentation generalizable interests from those that are and remain particular” (Habermas, 1975, p. 108).

Linda Zerilli has discussed Habermas’s criticism more than any other commentator. However, she is expressly unconcerned with fending off his accusation that Arendtian judgments lack a proper cognitive foundation. For Zerilli the criticism is misplaced: “the critical charge entirely misses the mark” in presupposing validity as the “all important” problem of a theory of political judgment. Proceduralists like Habermas (and Rawls) conceive of judgment “almost wholly as a problem of adjudicating value conflicts in the absence of universal criteria” (Zerilli, 2005, p. 161; 2016, p. 2). On Zerilli’s reading of Arendt, the main threat to democracy is not the clash of “ultimate value orientations” but “the deterioration of the common world,” which can be maintained only through the disclosure in speech of a plurality of perspectives (2016, p. 266). Zerilli thus reframes the problem, putting forward an account according to which the central problem of Arendt’s theory of judgment is the affirmation of human freedom.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, she finds that Habermas’s criticism loses its force.

While I find Zerilli’s account compelling in foregrounding the prior question of what it means to have a common world, it also shifts our focus from a question that, even if secondary, still must be answered (2016, p. 10).<sup>6</sup> There are

two ways to understand the claim that the question of the common world is prior to the question of adjudication. While we might see this as the claim that it is more vital, we also may see it as having equal importance, but insist that methodologically it must be addressed first—because it is only then that can we take up the question of how to adjudicate between the various perspectives that constitute the common world we have built. I prefer the latter way of seeing things and see no reason for thinking that Zerilli requires us to think in terms of the former. Still, in reframing the problem as being other than one of adjudication and validity, Zerilli does not address the Habermasian worry directly and on its own terms. This leaves a gap, which I do not see as a minor afterthought, as if Arendt had no way of responding.

## 2 | PLURALITY AS FACT AND NORM

In *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt singles out Kant as being “more aware than any other philosopher of human plurality” (1978, p. 96). Though it has not gone entirely unnoticed that Arendt’s conception of plurality is “certainly also indebted to Kant,” there has been no sustained treatment of the topic (Gasché, 2017, p. 235 note). There is a vast and burgeoning literature on Kant’s influence on Arendt, but it is almost exclusively devoted to their respective theories of judgment and thus Arendt’s reading of Kant’s third *Critique*. Even those who contend that Arendt’s concept of plurality is vital for understanding her theory of judgment (Loidolt, forthcoming) do not engage with Kant on this point.

The word pluralism appears only once in all of Kant’s published works—in section 2 of his 1798 text, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. After discussing consciousness of oneself—the human being’s ability to have the representation “I think”—Kant proceeds to discuss three types of egoism (*Eigenliebe*). Egoism in general is a presumptive attitude characterized by a subject regarding herself as if she were the sole object of importance and worth. The moral egoist treats herself as if she were the only end. Such an individual prioritizes her own value over that of other human beings, treating them as a mere means to her own happiness. But egoism also plays itself out in aesthetics and ordinary perceptual experience. The aesthetic egoist is “satisfied with his own taste,” unphased by the criticism or even ridicule of others, for he sees in himself “the touchstone of artistic beauty” (1798/2006, p. 18). The logical egoist sees no value in conferring with others as to the way objects appear to him, in order to determine the truth or falsity of his empirical judgments (e.g., whether the ringing in his ears is caused by an object, or whether he is just hearing things).

Having defined these three forms of egoism, Kant then strikingly asserts that “[t]he opposite of egoism can only be *pluralism*, that is, the way of thinking in which one is not concerned with oneself as the whole world, but rather regards and conducts oneself as a mere citizen of the world” (p. 18).<sup>7</sup> What makes this striking is that Kant takes the word pluralism to be the most precise way of capturing what is capable of opposing egoism in all of its forms. We might think humility or modesty would be a more natural choice. And in fact, these are not mutually exclusive ideas; these latter notions are *contained* in the former, as Kant presents it. For example, at various points in his anthropology lectures, Kant contrasts egoism with modesty, which he says is a form of prudence by which we try to suppress our egoism (2012, p. 262). Notably, pluralism for Kant is not descriptive of a state of affairs; it is a manner or mode of thinking. To take up the pluralist mindset is to undergird one’s thinking with a commitment to the idea that I am but one human among many, thereby rejecting the idea that I am the only human—as if I were the entire world, the only thing that existed. Here we might think of the colloquial saying that ‘the world doesn’t revolve around you.’

Kant does not use egoism here to refer to an ontological fact, though it can be understood as representing a way of thinking characterized by an “as if” commitment to an ontological position that Kant does discuss elsewhere. Alexander Baumgarten, whose *Metaphysics* textbook Kant taught from for over 20 years, defines an egoist as: “One who holds this world to be a simple being, and holds it to be oneself” (Baumgarten, 2013, p. 173). The argument for such a claim begins with a preceding observation about the notion of a world, where it is said that the world is either a simple or a composite being (i.e., a substance that is either a whole or is composed of parts). Someone who believes the former is an egoist, for she asserts her own existence and then has no choice but to identify the world with herself—for, after all, the world in its simplicity can only contain one object. Yet on Kant’s cosmology, “the egoist world [is] a contradiction because only diverse substances constitute a world” (1997, p. 555, note).

That Kant had this in mind when discussing egoism is clear from his metaphysics lectures: “Whoever maintains that nothing exists besides himself is an egoist”; “one who assumes . . . that he is the only existing being” (1997, pp. 28, 358). Thus we might say of someone who is an egoist in their moral and aesthetic life that it is as if they really *believe* they are the sole object of existence: “Every human being has a kind of egoism in himself, as he does not think that he is the center of the world, to be sure, yet he certainly wishes to be” (2012, p. 348). Hence, a proper ontology—the existence of a world, understood as the reciprocal relations (i.e., community) of finite substances—is itself an argument against adopting the egoist stance in other domains.

In her 1965 lecture, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” Arendt invokes Kant’s definition of pluralism—rendering the term “plurality.”<sup>8</sup> What Arendt finds most significant in this passage for her purposes is the notion that it is not moral theory but taste that plays a central role in displacing egoism. Arendt says of Kant: “only [in the aesthetic realm] did he consider men in the plural, as living in a community” (2003, p. 142). It is only in the formation of aesthetic judgments that we truly learn to consider others. To form an opinion requires the presence of actually existing others, a plurality of individuals with whom we inhabit a world.

Plurality is a central theme in Arendt’s work. In *The Human Condition* Arendt puts forward the threefold distinction between the human activities of labor, work and action, linking the latter to plurality. It is “the only activity that goes on directly between men,” which is conditioned by “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (1958, p. 7). There are as many perspectives as there are people: “nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live”—and this fact functions as “*the condition . . . of all political life*” (pp. 7–8). The public realm is constituted by the disclosure in speech of a plurality of viewpoints: “the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects,” which Arendt also calls “the common world” (p. 57). It is only through each of us putting forwards these perspectives, revealing who we are, that we both relate to and separate ourselves from others—generating a space between us, but also one around which we can unite.

Plurality is a paradox because it is an utter uniqueness that we all possess, and thus a way in which we are all the same (p. 176). Were we not equal in this crucial way we could not understand each other; if we did not differ at all, then we would have no need to speak to each other. It is only in the public realm, where we appear to each other, that we encounter views different from our own. But this is only intelligible on the condition that there *are* others who are different from me. Plurality thus bestows on action and speech a political significance, making them both meaningful and possible.

On repeated occasions Arendt draws a contrast between men in the plural and Man in the singular—illuminating the implicit ontological commitments of two other significant threats to plurality: totalitarianism and mass society (1958, pp. 4, 19; 1955, p. 31; 2005, p. 61). Both of these, in their own ways (either from the top down, or the bottom up), work to eliminate plurality under the presupposition that human beings are nothing but “endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model”—that the sum total of human beings is nothing more than the “simple multiplication of a single species,” as if there were a human nature or essence (1958, p. 8; 2005, p. 176).

Under tyranny, human beings are deprived of a public space where they can showcase themselves, losing their individuality. In stripping human beings of their capacity for spontaneous self-expression, says Arendt, “[t]otal domination . . . strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual” (1951, p. 438). By isolating us and keeping us apart, it gives us no reason and no means to speak with each other. In conditions of mass society, human beings also lose their distinctiveness—not by being driven apart but by being driven together. They are not rewarded for their uniqueness but instead encouraged towards conformity.

Common to both threats is an implicit commitment to ontological egoism: it is “*as if* all of humanity were just one individual,” “*as though* their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimension” (1951, pp. 438, 465–66; emphasis added). Even without an express statement of this on the part of any political actor, their underlying action functions to erase plurality—“*as though* not men in their infinite plurality but man in the singular, one species and his exemplars, were to inhabit the earth” (1955, p. 31; emphasis added). The consequences of this are nothing less than the destruction of the common world, which can only exist in the space between men—“in all their variety” (p. 31). Hence

the destruction of the common world is brought about through a preceding destruction of “the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality ... when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective” (1958, p. 58), as if there were only one human being.

Insofar as such threats to human freedom, individuality, and plurality exist, a different underlying ontology than egoism is needed. Following Kant, Arendt sees plurality as not just an ontological fact that is reducible to a position about how things *are*. She instead sees this as having significant normative implications that require us to take up a particular stance in our thinking. In forming my judgments I must take into account a plurality of perspectives, representing to myself the standpoints of others with whom I share a world.

In the third *Critique* Kant introduces the notion of a common, or communal, sense (*sensus communis*) that grounds judgments of taste and gives them their special validity. Crucial to the exercise of this judgment is the consideration of the judgments of others alongside my own, in an attempt to remove any subjective elements that might influence me, or which I might mistake for objective grounds. Kant then puts forward certain maxims or rules for our thinking: “1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everybody else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself” (1790/2001, p. 174). The second rule is of particular interest here, as it constitutes what Kant calls a broad-minded rather than a narrow-minded way of thinking (p. 174). Kant says that what is at issue here is not whether a particular person’s natural capacity for thinking is great or small, but their “way of thinking” (*Denkungsart*) (p. 175).

Notably, Kant uses the term *Denkungsart* both in his definition of pluralism and here in his description of broad-minded thinking. While it is most often translated as way of thinking (elsewhere, manner or mode), Munzel renders it as “conduct of thought,” noting that the term plays a special role in Kant’s articulation of the concept of moral character: “an activity of thought informed by certain principles” (1998, pp. xv–xvi).

Arendt discusses this section of the third *Critique* in her Kant lectures, highlighting what she calls the idea of an enlarged mentality (*erweiterte Denkungsart*) (1982, pp. 70–72). Here, Arendt renders the term *Denkungsart* as a “turn of thought,” which provides a compelling image of what must occur for those who are committed to pluralism. Though prone to egoism in my thinking, I must turn away from a mode of representing the world in which my subjective standpoint on it is regarded as exhaustive, towards one that also takes into account the standpoints of everyone else. Arendt elaborates on this in her “Truth and Politics” article:

*Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective.... The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (1968, p. 241)*

Immediately after this, Arendt says that this notion of representative thinking *just is* the idea of an enlarged mentality expressed by Kant, though he failed to recognize its political implications. The very ability to think itself requires the presence of others, with whom I can communicate and whose standpoints I can imaginatively take up. What is required is that I rid myself of those subjective private conditions that result in egoistic thinking so that I can arrive at an altogether new standpoint, which is both “general” and “impartial” (1982, pp. 42–44). This is the aim of an active reason; one that conducts itself under the first maxim of thinking (to think for oneself), for which the second maxim is necessary. Indeed, Arendt directly links this idea to Kant’s pluralist world citizen:

*Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoint of all others are open to inspection ... [B]y the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides; in other words, it adopts the position of Kant’s world citizen. To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting. (1982, p. 43; emphasis added)*

It is through the public use of one's reason, the free exchange of ideas amongst a plurality of individuals, that initially egoistic and uncritical human beings are able to develop into active and thoughtful citizens of the world. The norms that we must adhere to when we evaluate our own judgments are determined—at least in part—by there being more than just our own judgments out there. These points of view are not only constitutive of the world we all inhabit; they shape the community sense and therefore what counts as a valid opinion. The fact of plurality—that I am but one human among many, that there are more opinions than just mine—generates an ethical injunction, a maxim of thinking: I must imagine the world from the point of view of others. The presence of this maxim “testifies to the quality of one's will” (1982, p. 71).

The egoist refuses to adopt this maxim, isolating herself with her own judgment and enacting an entirely private sense (Kant, 1798/2006, p. 113). In section 50 of the *Anthropology*, Kant describes this loss of common sense as a kind of madness or insanity—a passage Arendt invokes in several places (1982, pp. 70–71; HAP-032192; HAP-032297a). For Kant, what is tragic about this lack of regard for others is the way it deprives one of the opportunity to test one's opinions—advancing them in public, in front of others. As a result, something that holds only for me is elevated to the level of objectivity: I treat it as if it were true.<sup>9</sup> This is why Arendt takes truth to be inherently egoistic, for it sees only one human being as necessary for reaching a conclusion. Such a person, says Kant, is “abandoned to a play of thoughts in which he sees, acts, and judges, not in a common world, but rather in his own world (as in dreaming)” (p. 114). By contrast, the pluralist sees herself as a citizen of the world, and this informs the way she conducts her thinking.

### 3 | BETWEEN CONSENSUS AND DISSENSUS

Arendt was not unaware of the challenges posed by plurality. She draws on the idea, stretching back to the Greeks, that “the world opens up differently to every man,” based on his unique location in the world (1990, p. 80). This can only ever result in “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” (1958, pp. 183–184). In this way, the problem of disagreement arises quite naturally from Arendt's account of plurality. That is, it would just seem to follow from the fact that each human being has a unique perspective on the world that there will be different and often incompatible opinions about it. And while Zerilli describes the problem in terms of *disagreement*, we can also formulate the issue positively in terms of agreement. The link to plurality is reinforced only when we observe that neither issue can get off the ground unless there are others to begin with. For it hardly makes sense to talk about agreement—much less, disagreement—if I was the only person. Conversely, the existence of actual others generates the potential for agreement.

Once we have found a way to build and sustain a common world we cannot stop there, as if plurality were an end in itself. We must then consider how to deal with the multiplicity of perspectives that have been put forward. It would be problematic if the cost of plurality was the ability to make sense of the array of viewpoints with which we are confronted. Though there are some who see this consequence of plurality as something to be remedied through a procedure that removes or at least minimizes conflict, Arendt is not one of these thinkers. At the same time, Arendt does not celebrate disagreement—nor does she think we must resign ourselves to it.

Arendt's conclusions may be too modest for her critics. Nevertheless, they are more robust than their criticisms suggest. In the remainder of this section, I argue for the following set of claims. Arendt is not against agreement and consensus as such, only certain frameworks under which it is coerced. In fact, Arendt thinks that it follows from both the nature of judgments themselves and the way that we engage in discourse about them that a certain level of agreement is possible. However, agreement is never fully attainable and it is certainly never guaranteed. Most importantly, irrespective of whether agreement is reached, the very act of imaginatively representing the world from the standpoints of others is what overcomes egoism in my thinking and preserves plurality.

It is natural to wonder whether Arendt may be against any kind of agreement whatsoever, seeing the overriding of plurality as potentially built into the very notion of consensus. Setting aside the question of whether reason is capable of performing the task that Habermas assigns to it—that of uniting a myriad of perspectives into a singular ‘take’—Arendt is concerned with the way that he comes to subordinate plurality to reason. Anything which results in

everyone converging on the same view, whereby “all men would suddenly unite in a single opinion,” she says, would destroy plurality and, with it, the common world (1955, p. 31). A more careful look at the context of this passage, however, reveals that Arendt is speaking strictly of matters of truth. The real danger lies in claims made under the guise of a universal human nature—speaking as if there were just one human being. In matters of judgment and opinion, reason is deprived of its place of primacy where it can make truth claims. Far from suggesting that any agreement at all is dangerous, this passage reveals that what Arendt finds problematic is agreement that has been brought about coercively.

If Arendt were still to believe that any agreement at all was undesirable, this would be as much as to say that the end of plurality is plurality itself—a variety of voices and multiplicity of perspectives *for their own sake*. We might ask what the point of discussing our views with each other is, and all we would be told is that this very interaction and engagement with each other is required to maintain the public realm. Accordingly, we would find ourselves in a bizarre situation where we must act and speak in the presence of others in order to prevent this very space in which we can appear before others from disappearing. It is for exactly this reason that I think Zerilli’s account must address the issue, lest she be committed to this kind of position. Indeed, we do not put forward our views “in order to simply add to the wonderful diversity of opinions” (Schwartz, 2016, p. 180).

In his antinomy of taste, Kant contends that “wherever it is supposed to be possible to argue, there must be hope of coming to mutual agreement” (1790/2001, p. 214). Arendt endorses Kant’s conception of the nature of discourse about beauty, declaring that “Kant was outraged that the question of beauty should be decided arbitrarily, without the possibility of dispute and mutual agreement, in the spirit of *de gustibus non disputandum est*” (2003, p. 139). For Kant, the very way in which we take up the very activity of argumentation and debate tells us something about the prospect of agreement. If we are arguing about our differences, then there is some sense in which we presuppose—even, hope—that we can arrive at some kind of agreement: “one must be able to count on grounds for the judgment that do not have merely private validity and thus are not merely subjective” (Kant, 1790/2001, p. 214). The unique normative status of judgments, for Arendt, means that a certain amount of agreement is possible. Even though judgments lack the objective validity of truth claims, they transcend the private validity of merely subjective preferences as a result of being rooted in the community sense.

Arendt refers to this intersubjective validity of a judgment as its impartiality—attained by taking a plurality of perspectives into account; the product of an enlarged mentality. There emerges from this a distinct method of rational argumentation—albeit one that differs from a strictly logical procedure (i.e., a proof). While one may not be able to prove anything definitively, we should not think that this is the only method for establishing the validity of our opinions. Even though there are no rules for making judgments of taste, Kant holds that they are nonetheless things that we can reason about. This would not be the case if they were not grounded in something we hold in common, which transforms what would otherwise be an entirely private and noncommunicable experience into something “which takes all others and their feelings into account” (Arendt, 1982, p. 72). In the “Crisis and Culture” essay, Arendt explicitly links the possibility of arriving at a shared viewpoint to the distinctiveness of the faculty of judgment, which “rests on a *potential agreement with others*” (1968, p. 220; emphasis added). Even though the standpoint of impartiality will never “actually settle the dispute,” it secures for us a common space in which we can contend in a meaningful way with each other about our opinions—seeking to persuade others while at the same time imagining the world from their standpoint (1982, p. 42). This is a condition on the possibility of any future agreement, for it is that without which no speech and action could even occur.

Of course, the amount of agreement that is possible will seem minimal to those who adhere to the Habermasian ideal. Habermas is focused on the discursive formation of a common will through rational agreement, whereas Arendt is concerned with preserving freedom as a way of guarding against the tyranny of truth and other threats to plurality. What Habermas wants out of a theory of rational discourse is the promise of consensus, and so he will not be unsatisfied with the messy project of contending with each other in the public square by appealing to the particular instead of the universal. Consensus is by no means a guaranteed outcome for Arendt because there is no procedure that can tell us how to secure it; nothing follows from simply from engaging in dialogue with each other and attempting to enlarge our



perspectives.<sup>10</sup> The upshot of this, Arendt thinks, is that when consensus does happen to be reached, we can know that it was reached freely.

There is at least one aspect of plurality which ensures that full consensus will always remain impossible: namely, the ineliminable element of individuality in each judgment. For as united as we may be in inhabiting a common world, all of us “have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of objects” (Arendt, 1958, p. 57). Moreover: “Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (p. 57). Our unique locations not only entail an element of uniqueness in our views, but are also what give meaning to the acts by which we disclose these views to others. In this way, then, plurality can never be entirely destroyed, even though it certainly can be marginalized or suppressed. Even under the worst conditions, where the pretences and illusions of egoism and singularity reign, plurality still exists. While this may at first seem a minimal claim, it should give us a degree of optimism that plurality can never be fully stamped out.

But more to the point, the kind of agreement that is possible is not something that could ever destroy plurality. When Arendt discusses acts of ‘representative thinking,’ she notes that it is an act of “being and thinking *in my own identity* where actually I am not [i.e., the standpoint of others]” (1968, p. 241; emphasis added). When I imagine the world from your point of view, I do so as myself. The result is something altogether new, a ‘third thing’—my view *plus* yours—which is an improvement on either of our views by themselves (1982, p. 42). If I retain my initial position, I do so with the benefit of having considered yours. If I change my mind, I do so by way of my particular history, set of experiences, and so on, which do not disappear in the process. That each of us has a distinct perspective on the world means that even if my view overlaps with yours, it can never be identical to it: “I still speak with my own voice” (2003, p. 140–141). Even if we come to agree in our opinions, they remain distinct at least insofar as they are each our own. This is also not trivial, for it is yet another important sense in which plurality can never be erased.

Finally, regardless of whether agreement is reached—for simply enlarging our perspectives never *entails* agreement—there is something significant about the injunction to take up the pluralist way of thinking, to think as a citizen of the world. To make this intuition more concrete, consider two sets of conditions under which we might disagree. In the first instance, you and I disagree because we are both egoists—content with our respective judgments, refusing even to hear each other out, or to entertain each other’s opinion. In another instance, we imagine the world from each other’s point of view, trying to understand why we see things the way we do—but, in the end, still disagree. Though we grant that each other’s views are reasonable, we still prefer our own. On Arendt’s view, both of our judgments are more valid in the second case just for having gone through this process. Plurality is preserved *not* primarily because there remain two views rather than one, but because, in seeking mutual understanding, egoism is overcome.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

Some may wish to challenge this final point, however, and see in the very idea of an enlarged mentality a way to secure at least some agreement. In a recent article, Jonathan Peter Schwartz (2018b) argues that following through on what I have called the pluralist injunction guarantees consensus on certain liberal commitments. I briefly wish to consider this suggestion before concluding my own discussion.

Schwartz’s consideration of the question of consensus arises from his account of ideology in Arendt. Ideology arises from a failure to appreciate the distinct validity of judgment, treating our disagreements as logical or factual ones: “[I]ndividuals seek to close down debate on political questions by asserting that their political opinions are not just better than their opponents’ opinions, but instead objectively true while all others are false and mistaken” (p. 492). But Arendt makes use of Kant’s notion of reflecting judgment precisely because of its characteristic feature: intersubjective validity.<sup>11</sup> Though judgments are not objectively right or wrong, they are still assessable under normative criteria: “Because political judgment is inherently perspectival and deliberative, its form of validity allows us to decide when

some judgments are better than others, but it does not provide objective answers to political questions" (Schwartz, 2018b, p. 492). Without this middle way, the refusal to turn to ideology would force us to conclude that all political opinions are equally valid in their non-bindingness (e.g., just 'agree to disagree').

But can we really not say that certain views are just wrong? If ever there were contenders for such opinions and judgments that ought to be dismissed outright, then racism and sexism surely would be the first among them. Yet Arendt's rejection of the idea that judgments are truth-apt prevents us from saying that these views are false. At most, we can say that these opinions are worse than others. Those who find this account unintuitive, Schwartz thinks, need not worry. For enlarging one's mentality will all but ensure the outcome that is hoped for by the deliberativists. The result is—"for all intents and purposes"—the same (2018b, p. 510). Schwartz singles out our modern notion of human rights as something that he thinks follows from the idea of an enlarged mentality, claiming that broadening one's thinking and taking into account the viewpoints of others leads one to this basic liberal stance.

Schwartz's discussion helpfully focuses our attention on the following question: What is already implicitly agreed on by anyone who would take up the pluralist way of thinking? For it would seem that a community of earnest pluralists has reached consensus on at least one thing: namely, that the perspective of the other is in some way valuable. At the same time, the kind of consensus that Schwartz thinks obtains is so minimal that it may hardly even deserve to be called this. It is only a *procedural* consensus—concerning what is needed to engage in dialogue—distinct from the *substantive* consensus that deliberative democrats are primarily concerned with—pertaining to the outcome of that dialogue. Indeed, this would be to read Arendt as a kind of proceduralist, and thus very close to Habermas.<sup>12</sup> Arendt's procedure would consist in a single step, that of taking up the pluralist way of thinking—not a set of neutral rules that would govern our discourse.

I am skeptical of how far this can get us. Schwartz seems to think that we can extract the contemporary idea of human rights solely from this procedural consensus. But it would be a mistake to think we could derive this thick concept from the mere willingness to consider the viewpoints of others. We can imagine a rational sociopath, who merely recognizes that taking into account the views of others is instrumentally valuable. And even when enlarging one's mentality succeeds in dethroning egoistic thinking, as Arendt says it must, there will never be a deductively assured path from the setting aside of self-interestedness to the affirmation of the inherent dignity and value of all human beings (1982, p. 43). Moreover, even if we all agreed on this latter notion, we may still disagree on its application in the context of specific issues (say, abortion or capital punishment).

Though Schwartz chooses to cash out the pluralist injunction as a type of proceduralism, he also acknowledges that, for Arendt, consensus is ultimately never guaranteed, leading me to think that our positions are not very far from each other after all (2018b, p. 508). For to say that consensus is extremely likely is still not to say that it is certain. This is the sticking point that keeps Arendt and Habermas from being fully aligned.

In closing, let me note a few upshots of the account I have provided here. Most importantly, I hope to have shown that Arendt's take on the issue of (dis)agreement is neither Habermasian, nor is it what Habermas fears. Arendt's attempt to articulate, in true Kantian form, a middle way between two extremes has been acknowledged—even by the likes of Zerilli (2016, p. xiv; 42). Yet we can now see this to a greater extent: consensus can never be rationally coerced, while deep disagreement need not be something to which we resign ourselves. Normative pluralism has the capacity to take us out of our isolation, though it also has neither the power to merge us into a singular whole, nor the wish to see us so dissolved. We need not settle for the line that Zerilli takes, dismissing the issue of agreement as one with which Arendt was not concerned. In urging us to turn away from the issue of adjudication, Zerilli challenges the reader to consider what is lost when we are preoccupied with achieving consensus (2016, p. xii). Yet I hope to have sufficiently motivated and provided an answer to a structurally similar question: what is lost when, once we have secured such freedom, we fail to take up the equally important—even if secondary—task of making sense of the plurality of perspectives that we now encounter? While Arendt may have rejected the idea that there was a single right answer to be had, she also refused to grant that any point of view was as good as another.

There is also a significant payoff in coming to see the relevance of Kant's *Anthropology* for Arendt. This does not merely concern textual lineage—though bringing to bear the influence on Arendt of other Kantian texts besides the

third *Critique* can contribute to the history of ideas. There is an important philosophical significance, serving to articulate a conceptual connection between Arendt's account of plurality and her theory of judgment—the absence of which has left us with a needlessly truncated understanding of what she has to offer us. The normatively laden conception of pluralism that she inherits from Kant indicates to us the sorts of individual transformations that must occur in order to sustain the community of discourse. We should not forget that Kant chooses to articulate his notion of pluralism in the *Anthropology* rather than in the Doctrine of Right (*Rechtslehre*). His pluralism is not the purely formal idea of another human being, but the actual other with whom I share a world—*this* world. It is far too easy for the Habermasian to operate with a notion of pluralism in which the particular other drops out of the picture altogether, and the goal becomes: how to get a multiplicity of individuals to converge on a single opinion—as if there was only one human, to speak with Kant and Arendt.

And so, finally, this points to further issues for contemporary democratic theorists to explore—especially regarding to the way in which different accounts of pluralism can be used to ground a theory of judgment. Here, Arendt gives us at least three distinct strands of inquiry to pursue. The first concerns what we are to make of disagreement as such. We may see it as something to be overcome, something to be gotten rid of. Arendtian pluralism attempts to carve out a wider space between the all too frequent, binary distinction between simple agreement, on the one hand, and rigid disagreement, on the other.<sup>13</sup> The second concerns the scope of the validity of our judgments. For Arendt, what we are aiming for is *general* rather than *universal* validity—judgments that can be recognized as valid within my community, not in all possible worlds where there are rational beings (see Schwartz 2018b, p. 499). Universal validity is not only unattainable in the realm of politics—it is also dangerous. Hence Arendt does not see general validity as a mere second best, but rather as uniquely suited to the situation we find ourselves in: each with opinions that are inherently perspectival and yet inhabiting a world that we have in common and are seeking to fortify.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Arendt challenges us to consider the relevance of the other, once they have come into view in their concreteness. For it becomes easy, when I deal only with the generalized other, to see them merely as someone who I can get to agree with me. Instead, Arendt would have us ask: how can your perspective on the world enhance mine?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Versions of this article were presented at the Université de Montréal (Atelier de recherche des boursiers.e.s, November 2018), Universität Paderborn (Hannah Arendt: Challenges of Plurality, December 2018), the University of British Columbia (Canadian Philosophical Association annual conference, June 2019), and Wuhan University (the Wuhan Kant Conference, June 2019). I am grateful to these audiences for their questions and discussion. I am especially thankful to Victor Muniz-Fraticelli and William Clare Roberts, who not only read many drafts of this article but provided me with invaluable feedback and stimulating conversation. Thanks also to Aberdeen Berry, G. Anthony Bruno, Emily Carson, and three anonymous referees from this journal for helpful comments and suggestions. This study has been funded by the Groupe de recherche en philosophie politique de Montréal (GRIPP). The McGill Faculty of Arts, through a Graduate Mobility Award, supported an extended visit to the Hannah Arendt Archives at the New School for Social Research in New York City. I am thankful for the hospitality I received while there, especially from Despina Dontas.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There are no fewer than 40 references to both this text and Kant's *Reflections on Anthropology*, in Arendt's lecture notes on Kant. In addition to the well-known published transcripts (1982, edited by Beiner), there are five other courses which are archived in the Hannah Arendt Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC). I discuss these in more detail in what follows, using the convention 'HAP' followed by the document number when citing this material.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, my account differs from agonist interpretations of Arendt (e.g., those of Bonnie Honig and Dana Villa). For these commentators, conflict and disagreement is taken to be an essential aspect of the political. So, though we are both engaged in arguing against Habermas' focus on the conditions necessary for reaching consensus, the similarities end here. On my view, Arendt occupies a position in between these two. See also my footnote 13.

- <sup>3</sup>To say that judgments themselves are not truth claims is not to set them fully at odds with truth, as if truth has no bearing whatsoever on how I form my judgments. For example, I cannot form judgments that display a total disregard for what is the case—and certain judgments will be deemed better than others based on their relationship to truth. Hence, matters of truth cannot be entirely excluded from our discourse. Still, the question of the place of truth in judgment formation is complicated. For more on this, see Zerilli (2016, pp. xiii, 117–142) and Schwartz (2018a, pp. 239–240, 2018b, pp. 502–507).
- <sup>4</sup>I have generally restricted my focus to the passages in Habermas that Zerilli deals with in framing her own discussion. A critical study of Habermas, which would require looking at a vast body of work spanning many decades, is beyond the scope of this article. For an excellent recent example of a commentator who takes such an approach, see Verovšek (2019).
- <sup>5</sup>Zerilli first develops this line of argument in her 2005 article. It should be noted that she does not argue for this claim in a way that can be concisely reconstructed. Instead, she makes the case for an alternative reading by reframing the problem of judgment for Arendt. In this way, the argument spans her entire 2016 book. Readers interested in her engagement with Habermas on this specific point, however, should examine Chapter 1 (pp. 1–40), as well as portions of chapters 4, 7, and the conclusion (pp. 119, 132–135, 186–197, 266–269, 278–281).
- <sup>6</sup>I remain agnostic on just how much adjudication should remain a significant part of a theory of judgment, or to what extent one ought stress the dynamic of freedom. I only want to note that the question must be addressed at some point.
- <sup>7</sup>“Dem Egoism kann nur der Pluralismus entgegengesetzt werden, d. i. die Denkungsart: sich nicht als die ganze Welt in seinem Selbst befassend, sondern als einen bloßen Weltbürger zu betrachten und zu verhalten” (Ak. 7:130).
- <sup>8</sup>Arendt invokes this passage in at least two other unpublished notes (HAP-024649, HAP-032297b). The translation reads: “Egoism can be opposed only by plurality, which is a frame of mind in which the self, instead of being enwrapped in itself as if it were the whole world, regards itself as a citizen of the world” (2003, pp. 142–143). The translation helpfully presents pluralism as something that actively opposes egoism, and is not just its opposite, in the logical or definitional sense.
- <sup>9</sup>Schwartz has recently argued that Arendt’s notion of ideology consists in just this: attributing to my non-truth apt judgments the status of truth and objectivity (2018b, p. 505). I deal with an aspect of his argument below.
- <sup>10</sup>Vasterling (2015) briefly considers the issue of agreement and consensus in her discussion of how the themes of plurality and action figure in both Arendt and Habermas, highlighting the central difference between the two: Arendt does not subordinate plurality to unity like Habermas does. She draws two conclusions that accord with the view I am articulating here: (a) reason can never secure consensus, and (b) plurality will never entirely disappear (p. 170). For a further treatment of these issues and their relation to the way these thinkers view the aims of discussion, see also Vasterling (2019).
- <sup>11</sup>Two recent commentators deserve mention for their efforts from within critical theory to articulate the advantages of Arendt’s theory of judgment over the Habermasian framework, leaning heavily on the notion of intersubjective validity to do so. First, Ferrara (2008) takes up Kant’s notion of exemplarity to develop what he calls the judgment paradigm, an alternative to the universalist model of validity. Ferrara’s starting point is Kant’s insight that particulars can exemplify universals, and he follows Arendt in extending this beyond aesthetic objects and into the political. The import of this for the question of (dis)agreement is clear: the normative force of the example stands apart from that of determinate rules or objective principles, capable of persuading others without coercing their assent. We stand a chance of winning over those who disagree with us if we select a particularly good example; and yet because an example will always remain a particular it will never be able to compel the agreement of another as a universal can. Ferrara’s defence of Arendt against Habermas by appeal to this distinctive normative validity is entirely complementary to the one I provide here. See, in particular, his first two chapters, where he deals with Kant and Arendt, respectively (pp. 16–61). Second, Azmanova (2012) extends Ferrara’s judgment paradigm in order to articulate a critical theory of judgment—capable of resolving the tension between social criticism and consensus, while at the same time enjoying a certain degree of political relevance (she calls this the judgment paradox). For a detailed discussion of the way this issue emerges in Arendt, see her Chapter 5 (pp. 118–135). Azmanova puts forward what she calls the critical consensus model, which requires for its stability not only continual justification but persistent openness to revision.
- <sup>12</sup>The most well-known commentator to do this is Benhabib (2000), who uses Arendt in order to provide a corrective to Habermas. Benhabib claims that Arendt sees in Kant’s idea of reflecting judgment “a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm” (p. 189). In a similar vein, Landemore (2018) questions how different Zerilli’s Arendt actually is from Habermas and other deliberative democrats, especially regarding the importance of each individual perspective (p. 618). Finally, Mouffe, one of the most prominent defenders of agonism, refuses to read Arendt as an agonist precisely because, on her view, she is “not fundamentally different” from Habermas in her concern with agreement and consensus (2013, pp. 41–44).
- <sup>13</sup>In this respect, I follow those who have sought to overcome the strict dichotomy between consensus and dissensus. For example, Markell (1997) challenges the characterization of Habermas as a consensus thinker who is in strict opposition to Arendt, and Lederman (2014) argues that there is less of a contradiction between agonism and deliberation in Arendt than is often thought.

<sup>14</sup> I cannot deal in much detail with the more specific application of my account to current political issues and problems. But I will note that I see my reading of Arendt as especially suited to addressing today's political landscape insofar as it is characterized by intense partisan disagreement and division. This is because it helps to make visible the idea that conflict might be remedied by the mutual willingness to entertain the perspectives and reasons of others. We could imagine, then, Arendt recommending as a starting point in a discussion of gun control legislation that a lifelong National Rifle Association member take up the standpoint of someone whose life has been affected by a mass shooting, or in a dispute over immigration policy that the proponent of open borders take seriously the experience of those who live in communities sharply affected by an influx of immigrants.

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**How to cite this article:** Dunn N. Plurality and the potential for agreement: Arendt, Kant, and the "way of thinking" of the world citizen. *Constellations*. 2019; 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12449>