

Hannah Arendt's Notion of Common Sense and Reality

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Contents

Summary	4
I. Introduction	5
II. Understanding	8
Lived experience and the common world	8
Preliminary and true understanding	8
Is common sense the same as preliminary understanding?	10
Popular language versus inarticulate and uncritical	12
Knowing and understanding; truth and meaning	14
Is common sense only concerned with 'truth', not meaning?	14
Are there two faculties of common sense?	16
Perceiving, understanding ... and acting?	17
Conclusion	17
III. Human reality or the common world	18
A world of appearances	18
The polis – the common space of appearance	21
IV. Plurality	22
Plurality of the senses and the sixth sense	23
Plurality of objects	25
Plurality of human individuals	26
V. Communication	29
Language	29
Publicity	30
Speech	31
Storytelling	31
Representative thinking	33
VI. Conclusion	34
Bibliography	37

Summary

Hannah Arendt refers to 'common sense' in many places in her work and attributes it a significant role: it makes us fit into the common world; when lost, society disintegrates as happened under totalitarian regimes at the start of the twentieth century. There is controversy about what Arendt exactly means by 'common sense'. In this paper it is argued that the 'common sense' should not be understood as a kind of knowledge, nor as a mental organ, or a community feeling. Instead, I argue that Arendt's notion of common sense refers to having a valid understanding of human reality, enabled by the conditions of plurality and communication.

I. Introduction

The notion of 'common sense' plays an important role in the work of political philosopher Hannah Arendt. To give an impression: in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*¹ the loss of common sense is both the condition and the result of the totalitarian practices and atrocities; in *The Human Condition*² the loss of common sense is a result of the alienation process, which she considers a major characteristic of modernity; in *The Life of the Mind*³ common sense both is a "sixth sense" that combines the sense data from sense perception and precedes experience in the lifeworld; in the posthumously published notes of Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*⁴ (further: *Kant Lectures*) common sense is a faculty necessary for good judgment. Is it possible to identify and delineate one phenomenon underlying so many different appearances?

Many authors only discuss Arendt's notion of common sense in the context of its use in her *Kant Lectures*: as a separate faculty within the faculty of judgement. This is not surprising, both because judging is so fundamental to human affairs and politics, Arendt's philosophical domain, and because the *Lectures* give the most detailed description of the mental process of judging and the role common sense plays in it. Itay Snir observes that "this narrow reading (...) has led to accusing her of being inconsistent, or as holding on to several, incompatible concepts of common sense."⁵ In addition to a common sense within the faculty of judgement,⁶ Remi Peeters argues that Arendt also distinguishes a common sense within the cognitive faculty.⁷ According to Sandra Hinchman⁸, if we are to understand Arendt correctly, we must keep all the different designations of the

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1979), (further: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*).

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) (further: *The Human Condition*).

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I, *Thinking*, 1st ed. Gifford Lectures (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) (further: *Thinking*).

⁴ Hannah Arendt and Ronald S. Beiner, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) (further: *Kant Lectures*).

⁵ Itay Snir, "Bringing Plurality Together: Common Sense, Thinking and Philosophy in Arendt," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015): 362. Snir does not specify which authors accuse her of being inconsistent, and I have not found evidence for inconsistencies, but I can recognize a sense of confusion.

⁶ Remi Peeters, "Truth, Meaning and the Common World: The Significance and Meaning of Common Sense in Hanna Arendt's Thought - Part Two," *Ethical Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2009): 411-434, <https://doi.org/10.2143/EP.16.4.0000000>.

⁷ Peeters, "Truth, Meaning and the Common World: The Significance and Meaning of Common Sense in Hannah Arendt's Thought - Part One," *Ethical Perspectives* 16, no. 3 (2009): 337-359, <https://doi.org/10.2143/EP.16.3.2042718>.

⁸ Sandra Hinchman, "Common Sense & Political Barbarism in the Theory of Hannah Arendt." *Polity* 17, no. 2 (1984): 317-39. <https://10.2307/3234510>.

words 'common' and 'sense' in mind since they reveal a single root experience, which Hinchman says is "a consensus or shared opinion on the significance of a common life."⁹ Practically, according to Hinchman, "common sense refers to a process of developing our perspectives on public issues through discussion and debate during which participants are willing to learn from one another."¹⁰ This diversity of descriptions illustrates the lack of consensus in the secondary literature on what Arendt's notion of common sense precisely refers to.

Indeed, common sense is referred to in many places in Arendt's work and in many different ways. The way it is used may differ from one chapter or essay to the other, or even between paragraphs but the various uses can be distinguished according to two relevant contexts in Arendt's work: in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* the notion of common sense is used in a historical and political context; in *The Life of the Mind* and *Kant Lectures* it is used in the epistemological context of mental activities. In former context, Arendt discusses the historical changes and political conditions that have undermined common sense. In the latter context, Arendt focuses on common sense's role in the activities of thinking and judging. In both contexts and throughout Arendt's work, however, common sense is described as a sense of reality. It is important to note that the distinction between the two contexts is relative. Arendt is not a systematic thinker nor a conceptual thinker, her approach is phenomenological and she deploys a narrative or descriptive style.¹¹

The aim of this thesis is to give a comprehensive interpretation of common sense, taking into account the various uses of common sense in Arendt's work and the interpretation of these uses in the secondary literature. In order to achieve this aim, I will review the different uses of common sense throughout Arendt's work according to key elements of her notion of common sense. As a sense of reality, two key elements of common sense are the notion of *reality* and the notion of *understanding*: common sense is about understanding reality. *The Life of the Mind Volume I* is an important but not exclusive source for these two notions. Since common sense can be attenuated and lost, the third key element of common sense concerns its *conditions*: the political conditions that maintain

⁹ Hinchman, 326.

¹⁰ Hinchman, 317.

¹¹ Zie Veronica Vasterling (2011 Hannah Arendt. Sebastian Luft & Søren Overgaard (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*. New York: Routledge 2011: 82-91.

common sense are plurality, and communication. There is not a main source for these conditions, descriptive reference to these conditions is to be found throughout Arendt's work.

In what follows, I will argue for these two key elements of common sense based on a detailed discussion of both Arendt's work and pertinent secondary literature. I hope to show that common sense, in Arendt, refers to having a valid understanding of human reality, enabled by the conditions of plurality and communication.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. I will first discuss Arendt's notion of understanding, followed by a discussion of her concept of reality. I will explain how Arendt's phenomenological approach to understanding and reality qualifies her concepts of understanding and reality. Then I turn to the concept of plurality which plays a crucial role in Arendt's work and the related concept of communication. I will conclude with a discussion of how common sense as valid understanding of human reality is conditioned by plurality and communication.

II. Understanding

In the previous chapter I proposed that, for Arendt, common sense is a form of *understanding*—which is the subject of the current chapter. Arendt’s approach has been characterized as a hermeneutic phenomenology¹², freely translated as a reflective effort to interpret, i.e. determine the meaning, of phenomena in human experience. Arendt distinguishes between preliminary and true (reflective) understanding. I will discuss Borren’s proposition that common sense is the same as preliminary understanding, and its subsequent characterization as implicit, inarticulate and uncritical. Another distinction Arendt makes is between knowing and understanding (or truth and meaning). I will discuss the idea that common sense may be limited to the facts (knowing or truth), followed by Peeters proposition that there are in fact two faculties of common sense. I finish this chapter by extending the discussion, which up to this point limited ‘understanding’ to mental activities, so as to include ‘acting accordingly’.

Lived experience and the common world

For Arendt the everyday world of lived experience is closer to reality than abstract thought. Lived experience forms the basis of all forms of understanding, including the sciences and philosophy. An individual’s world consists of all things that he is aware of and that matter to him, that make up his experiences, his activities, the ‘web of relationships’ he participates, and so on. All our activities take place in the specifically human world, which likewise is the source of all our experiences. Arendt mostly speaks of ‘common world’—to stress the fact that it is shared with our fellow men—or just ‘world’ for this complex totality into which we are born.¹³ Arendt explains this *commonness* as “members of the same species [having] the same context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning.”¹⁴

Preliminary and true understanding

In the essay “Understanding and Politics”, Arendt distinguishes true—or reflective¹⁵—understanding from the preliminary understanding that precedes it. According to Veronica Vasterling preliminary understanding is considered to be

¹² See for example Borren, 231ff.

¹³ *Thinking*, 50. Arendt here says: “[common sense] fits the sensations of my strictly private five senses into common world shared by others”, both linking common sense to the common world, and stressing the shared character of the latter.

¹⁴ *Thinking*, 50.

¹⁵ Borren and Vasterling choose to use ‘reflective understanding’, as an alternative to ‘true understanding’. The former suggests it involves the activity of mental reflection, while the latter inadvertently suggests a link to truth as opposed to meaning or Gadamer’s fusion of perspectives (*Horizontverschmelzung*) which would be contrary to Arendt’s concept of plurality, see Vasterling, 172.

Arendt's translation of the hermeneutic notion of *Vorverständnis* which refers to a person's familiarity with the world.¹⁶ While understanding is impossible without relevant knowledge, "knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding."¹⁷ Arendt illustrates this interrelation by describing the conception of totalitarianism:

Preliminary understanding denounces totalitarianism as tyranny and has decided that our fight against it is a fight for freedom.¹⁸

This statement asserts that certain people have a 'preliminary understanding' which consists of a. having some form of acquaintance with it, either by experience or second hand, b. recognising totalitarianism as a form of tyranny, c. considering tyranny a threat to freedom, d. understanding that freedom is a precondition for human dignity, and e. human dignity being an invaluable good worth fighting for.

Such preliminary understanding, however confused or mistaken it may be, is much more decisive in terms of consequent actions, than any thorough analysis can possibly be. Arendt continues: "[this preliminary understanding] will certainly more effectively prevent people from joining a totalitarian movement than the most reliable information, the most perceptive political analysis, or the most comprehensive accumulated knowledge."¹⁹ What kind of information, analysis, or knowledge is she talking about here, that needs to be distinguished from understanding? Probably the actual conditions of totalitarianism, the incarceration of the opposition, the repression of minorities. All these things can and must be observed directly, counted as facts. Arendt's claims that "knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding". By this she means that, from the infinite amount of facts we could direct our attention to, our being affected by events determines which facts are decisive with regard to what is at stake.²⁰

¹⁶ Veronica Vasterling, "The Hermeneutic Phenomenological approach to Plurality: Arendt, Habermas, Gadamer", in Gerrit Jan van der Heiden, ed. *Phenomenological Perspectives on Plurality*, Studies in Contemporary Phenomenology, Volume 12, (Leiden: Brill/Boston, 2015), 171.

¹⁷ "Understanding and Politics", 310.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 311.

²⁰ Borren, 339, explains the concept of the opening of the hermeneutic circle as part of Arendt's hermeneutic phenomenology: "It is only when something unexpected happens, when things break down or when for other reasons our attention is awakened, that the automatic pilot of everyday, implicit understanding makes a place for the circle of explicit understanding or interpretation. Arendt emphasizes the essential role taste plays in eliciting our engagement and thus in triggering the hermeneutic process in the first place."

Arendt argues that “[true] understanding is based on knowledge”. As an example, with only superficial knowledge of the character of the Nazi regime one cannot justify the identification of a new form of government, totalitarian, distinct from the forms which were known already since the ancients: monarchical, republican, tyrannical, or despotic government. It was only by thorough analysis of the Nazi practices, that Arendt was able to see its characteristic mode of operation: how it used the situation of loss of common sense, caused by expropriation and the loss of public space of the masses, by replacing common sense with the super-sense of ideology, allowing people to comply to its demands and ignoring all known previous moral categories and standards. Such a reconceptualization by Arendt requires more than systematic retrieval of research data; it requires a perceptiveness or, as Kant would call it, judgement, or indeed “the so-called mother wit, the want of which no scholastic discipline can compensate.”²¹

Is common sense the same as preliminary understanding?

Marieke Borren’s primary source when discussing Arendt’s notion of common sense in her paper “A Sense of the World: Hannah Arendt’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Common Sense” is the essay “Understanding and Politics” just discussed. Borren maintains that Arendt describes common sense as “common, uncritical, inarticulate, or preliminary understanding.”²² According to Borren

we always have an immediate, intuitive, implicit, and non-reflective understanding of the things, events, and other people in the world. Explicit, reflective understanding, including philosophical and scientific understanding, is rooted in this prior implicit understanding, i.e. in presuppositions, or, in hermeneutic terms, the ‘fore-structure’ of understanding. What explicit understanding does is to ‘articulate and confirm what preliminary understanding ... sensed to begin with’ [quoting Arendt].²³

Borren in addition uses the distinctions: implicit versus explicit and non-reflective versus reflective understanding, suggesting that the qualifiers either are synonyms or in practice strongly related: I assume Borren considers reflection to be a process by which understanding acquires verbal expression, thereby becoming explicit. Another related opposition, is popular versus scholarly understanding, which also appears in a footnote in Arendt’s essay:

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, http://www.philosophy-index.com/kant/critique_pure_reason/i_sf_ii_a.php.

²² Borren, 239.

²³ Borren, 239.

The same need for orientation in a world changed through a new event that prompts popular understanding should also be the guide of true understanding, lest we lose ourselves in the labyrinths of facts and figures erected by the unquenchable curiosity of scholars. True understanding is distinguished from public opinion in both its popular and scientific forms only by its refusal to relinquish the original intuition.²⁴

Here we see *popular understanding* used as yet another wording, or at least standing in, for the preliminary understanding. The first sentence of the footnote supports the notion that Arendt uses a hermeneutic perspective. In our quest for the meaning of common sense, it is worth noting a rather peculiar turn in the last sentence of the footnote where Arendt seems to think that *public opinion* can—but not necessarily does—differ from reflective (true) understanding. When it does, it differs to the extent that it has abandoned the preliminary understanding.

At first sight ‘preliminary understanding’ seems to be a somewhat more descriptive synonym for common sense. However, there are some objections to this view. First, in the pages referred to in the footnote which should provide evidence for the Borren’s claim,²⁵ I did not find proof that Arendt considers them synonyms. Second, the essay “Understanding and Politics” is the only place I know of where Arendt uses the expression ‘preliminary understanding’—while common sense and its synonyms are used all over her work. ‘Preliminary understanding’ does not even appear in *The Life of the Mind*, which would be a logical place to find it. Third, when one tries to substitute one for the other, the result looks rather queer, for example try substituting ‘preliminary understanding’ in the phrase: “Since the beginning of this century, the growth of meaninglessness has been accompanied by loss of common sense.”²⁶ That doesn’t sound right. Indeed, according to Veronica Vasterling, instead of being synonymous, preliminary understanding *relies on* common sense, the latter referring to “being inserted in the world, allowing for common spatial, temporal, and material reference points and parameters.”²⁷ In defence of Borren’s interpretation one could point to Arendt’s informal style of writing. The general pattern seems to be that Arendt uses the synonym that best matches the argument she is making, that would most commonly appear in the specific context. When the context is realness, she will use sixth sense; when it is understanding versus knowledge, she will use ‘preliminary understanding’; when

²⁴ “Understanding and Politics”, 325fn6.

²⁵ Borren, 310-7, note 70.

²⁶ “Understanding and Politics”, 314.

²⁷ Vasterling, 2011, 578.

it is Kant's idea of common sense, she'll go for 'sensus communis'; when used in the above quote where she speaks of "orientation in a world" she may use 'popular understanding', and so on. In all other cases, when stating what should be obvious, she uses 'common sense'. However, if this is the correct explanation, one would still expect to find it used in other places in her work, which, as said, is not the case.

Popular language versus inarticulate and uncritical

Borren qualified common sense as inarticulate and uncritical. The following fragment raises doubts about this claim. Arendt writes:

If, on the other hand, the scholar wants to transcend his own knowledge-and there is no other way to make knowledge meaningful except by transcending it-he must become very humble again and listen closely to the popular language, in which words like "totalitarianism" are daily used as political clichés and misused as catchwords, in order to re-establish contact between knowledge and understanding.²⁸

Here Arendt warns us to "listen closely to the popular language", which gives us access to the preliminary understanding. Arendt concedes "it would of course lead us too far to try to distill, as it were, adequate concepts from the body of non-philosophical literature, from poetic, dramatic, historical, and political writings, whose articulation lifts experiences into a realm of splendor which is not the realm of conceptual thought."²⁹ The reference to popular language and the listing of common sense amongst songs, writings, etcetera makes one wonder whether, in what sense, and to what extent, common sense should be considered 'inarticulate'. In "Understanding and Politics" Arendt uses the word 'inarticulate' only once in the context of understanding: "knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding." Here the word 'inarticulate' is used to contrast it with the articulate, assumedly well-defined character of knowledge.³⁰ It is not easy to see how popular language might be considered 'inarticulate' in either meaning. The same applies if we consider

²⁸ Arendt, "Understanding and Politics", 311.

²⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 164.

³⁰ OED defines 'articulate' as "consisting of distinct parts having each a definite meaning." "articulate, adj. and n.", OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ru.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/11189?rskey=EhAgAU&result=1&isAdvanced=f> also (accessed March 21, 2019). The other meaning Arendt gives to inarticulate is 'without expressing itself or making itself heard', but that would not make sense in combination with 'popular language'. In *The Life of the Mind* she does not use 'inarticulate' at all, (except in two cases that concern sound).

common sense as preliminary understanding voiced in popular language. Does not popular language voice, express and articulate preliminary understanding?

Another qualification of common sense that Borren points to is its being 'uncritical'. Arendt herself uses this term seldomly, but when she does, she uses it in two ways: as being not important, or showing lack of criticism or critical exactness³¹. The former use is probably not intended here: I imagine all kinds of critical common sense expressions by the population regarding the king of France and his entourage at the time of the French revolution. The latter use obviously is the most appropriate one in our context, for example Arendt writes: "The sciences can only illuminate, but neither prove nor disprove, the uncritical preliminary understanding from which they start."³² But now 'uncritical' and 'inarticulate' seem to mean more-or-less the same: 'lacking scientific formality'.

Finally, the qualifier 'common'. Snir explains Arendt's multiple uses of this: "the 'sixth sense' should thus be understood as a common sense, not only because it is the common root of the five senses, and not only because it is a capacity that we all share, but primarily because it "fits us into, and thereby makes possible, a common world."³³ However, I would argue both the *us* in "fits us" and the concept of "common world" are vulnerable to critique when one considers the significant differences between individuals in their experiences, in their education, social and cultural background, in their temperament, etcetera.

The discussion so far shows that describing common sense as "common, uncritical, inarticulate, or preliminary understanding", has its limitations: it makes matters insufficiently clear, even if we extend the description with "of the lifeworld". First, it does not specify what is included in common sense and what not; second, the qualifiers are ambiguous and debatable; finally, it does not help to explain how one can lose common sense if it simply reflects the lifeworld. If the latter were the case all perception or experience of reality, of the lifeworld, would automatically be 'common sense', irrespective of the way things are going. That would make the loss of common sense, a major theme in Arendt's diagnosis of the human condition, impossible by definition.

³¹ "un'critical, adj.". OED Online. March 2019. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.ru.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/211046?redirectedFrom=uncritical> (accessed March 24, 2019).

³² Arendt, "Understanding and Politics", 311.

³³ Snir, 344.

Knowing and understanding; truth and meaning

Following Kant, Arendt argues that knowing and understanding are not the same.³⁴ Both involve a search or quest; they start with a form of involvement, a question. However, the origin, the character and results of the quest for knowledge and the quest for understanding, are fundamentally different. The *thirst for knowledge* originates in “our curiosity about the world, our desire to investigate whatever is given to our sensory apparatus. [...] The questions raised by the desire to know are in principle all answerable by common-sense experience and reasoning” “and the refinement of it we call science.” “What science and the quest for knowledge are after is irrefutable truth, that is, propositions human beings are not free to reject—they are compelling.” According to Arendt, “science's basic goal [is] to see and to know the world as it is given to the senses” and “its concept of truth is derived from the common-sense experience of irrefutable evidence”³⁵

In contradistinction, Arendt describes reflective—as opposed to preliminary—*understanding* as following “reason's [urgent] need”³⁶ and a “quest for meaning”. It concerns “the metaphysical questions that philosophy took as its special topics”. “It is in no way different from men's need to tell the story of some happening they witnessed, or to write poems about it.”³⁷ Parekh explains the quest for meaning in moral terms as “ultimately a desire to know what is worth doing or approving, what form of life is worth living, what kind of behavior is worthy of a human being, and why.”³⁸ These questions “arise out of ordinary common-sense experiences”³⁹, by which Arendt means experiences which are public in character and generally acknowledged. Neither common sense nor science can answer these questions.

Is common sense only concerned with ‘truth’, not meaning?

In the previous section I introduced Arendt's (Kant's) distinction between two different mental activities, knowing and understanding, the first oriented to truth, and the second to meaning. In the next section I will evaluate Peeters argument for the need to distinguish correspondingly two faculties of common

³⁴ In *Life of the mind*, page 14, Arendt writes “Crucial for our enterprise is Kant's distinction between *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, “reason” and “intellect”.” She explicitly refers to ‘understanding’ as *verstehen* and rejects the standard English translation of the Kantian notion of *Verstand* as understanding.

³⁵ *Thinking*, 58.

³⁶ Arendt writes: “To the question What makes us think? there is ultimately no answer other than what Kant called “reason's need,” the inner impulse of that faculty to actualize itself in speculation.” *The Life of the Mind*, 65.

³⁷ *Thinking*, 78.

³⁸ Parekh, 61.

³⁹ *Thinking*, 78.

sense. Here I investigate whether it is correct to consider common sense as to be only concerned with truth—and not meaning.

The first reason to consider this is that Arendt repeatedly qualifies science as an “prolongation”⁴⁰ or “refinement”⁴¹ of common sense. If we consider science to be involved with knowing and truth, would that than not apply to its origin? Also, Arendt posits that

the quest for meaning is "meaningless" to common sense and common-sense reasoning because it is the sixth sense's function to fit us into the world of appearances and make us at home in the world given by our five senses; there we are and no questions asked.⁴²

Can we decide from this quote that common sense specifically concerns the factual (“world given by our five senses”) and excludes the evaluative elements which are involved in meaning (“the quest for meaning is "meaningless" to common sense”)? I would argue this is not so. Against the first argument—science is refinement of common sense, science is about knowing, so is common sense—I would argue that meaning is more original to man than science. Science and knowing are secondary to it, are derivative. Arendt says:

By posing the unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings.⁴³

The second argument, “the quest for meaning is "meaningless" to common sense”, is not directed at the mental activity of understanding, which always is engaged with the world of appearances. Instead, it is directed at the activity of thinking, with at the high end of the spectrum philosophy. It is because of man’s engagement with the world of appearances that Arendt writes “man's need to reflect encompasses nearly everything that happens to him, things he knows as well as things he can never know.”⁴⁴ Even though she distinguishes truth and meaning, she does “not wish to deny that thinking’s quest for meaning and knowledge’s quest for truth are connected.”⁴⁵ When ‘death’ is ruminated, this certainly concerns a fact of life, and thoughts will go to our lost ones, and here we already move over the ‘line’ into what loss means, what the prospect of death means to me, and so on.

⁴⁰ *Thinking*, 54.

⁴¹ *Thinking*, 58.

⁴² *Thinking*, 59.

⁴³ *Thinking*, 62.

⁴⁴ *Thinking*, 14.

⁴⁵ *Thinking*, 61.

Behind all the cognitive questions [e.g. is there a cure for cancer?] for which men find answers, there lurk the unanswerable ones that seem entirely idle and have always been denounced as such.⁴⁶

Meaning is simply part-and-parcel of human reality. Common sense will have to acknowledge this fact to be able “to fit us into the [human] world” “and make us at home”. With the quote just discussed Arendt wants to make the point which she makes more often, that any speculative effort—be it philosophical or scientific—should eventually return home to the observable world—lest it become a “playing of the mind with itself”⁴⁷.

Are there two faculties of common sense?

Following Arendt’s distinction between truth and meaning, Remi Peeters, in two papers “Truth, Meaning and the Common World: The Significance and Meaning of Common Sense in Hanna Arendt’s Thought” (part I and II), has argued that Arendt refers to “two related, yet different ‘faculties’, common sense as a cognitive faculty [for truth] on the one hand and common sense as a faculty of judgment [for meaning] on the other.”⁴⁸ The first he identifies with the “sixth sense” or *le bon sens*, the second with the term “community sense”. Peeters argues “It is not thinking, with its search for meaning, but our common sense [the sixth sense] that warrants the revelation of truth and with it the possibility of (scientific) knowledge.” He adds “because truth compels the mind and precludes debate, Arendt distinguishes it sharply from opinion, which is never self-evident.” Borren, in agreement with Peeters, finds that “Arendt sometimes suggests the terms ‘common sense’ (‘sound human reason’, *gesunder Menschenverstand*, *le bon sens*) and *sensus communis* (‘community sense’, *Gemeinsinn*) refer to different phenomena or faculties.” “However, [contra Peeters] she never explains what exactly this difference pertains to and most of the she time does not make a distinction at all, simply calling it ‘common sense’, and uses the two notions interchangeably.” Borren concludes that the different wordings “have the same referent, though putting a somewhat different emphasis.”⁴⁹ In the previous section I argued that meaning is part-and-parcel of reality, as are matters of fact. My thesis is that it is not the orientation towards an object—truth or meaning (Peeters)—nor the faculty, ‘mental organ’ or ‘mental activity’ (knowing, thinking, judging) that determines common sense, but its

⁴⁶ *Thinking*, 62. Example mine.

⁴⁷ *The Human Condition*, 284.

⁴⁸ Peeters, “Truth, Meaning and the Common World: The Significance and Meaning of Common Sense in Hannah Arendt’s Thought - Part One”.

⁴⁹ Borren, 251 fn. 58.

linking to the world of appearances by means of plurality and communication—as I elaborate in the sections to come.

Perceiving, understanding ... and acting?

Arendt once described common sense as ‘our mental organ for perceiving, understanding, and dealing with reality and factuality.’⁵⁰ This suggests that, in addition to its world-disclosing function (perceiving, understanding), it also involves *acting* accordingly—what else could Arendt mean by ‘dealing with reality and factuality’? Is it not common sense to put one’s arm around the shoulder of someone in deep grief?⁵¹ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt writes that the inhabitant of Hitler’s Third Reich “had to develop a kind of sixth sense to know at a given moment whom to obey and whom to disregard.”⁵² Would it make sense not to *act* accordingly? Another confirmation of the appropriateness of allowing action to be included in understanding can be found in “Understanding and Politics”:

As such, understanding is a strange enterprise. In the end, it may do no more than articulate and confirm what preliminary understanding, *which always consciously or unconsciously is directly engaged in action*, sensed to begin with.⁵³

Here we can see Arendt linking action to preliminary understanding, always!

Conclusion

Different views on the meaning of the word ‘understanding’ in the context of Arendt’s notion of common sense have been taken in consideration. These views have reflected observations and distinctions found in Arendt’s work. However, the scholars presenting their interpretation did not give sufficient evidence for using distinctions to decide on a definite delineation Arendt’s notion of common: I do not think (contra Borren) that ‘common sense’ is ‘preliminary understanding’, nor that it necessarily ‘uncritical’, ‘inarticulate’, or implicit. I do not believe common sense is specifically concerned with truth, as opposed to meaning, or the other way around. Nor do I think it is correct to allow for two separate faculties of common sense (contra Peeters). I tend to interpret ‘understanding’ for our purpose in its broadest sense: preliminary *and* reflective, concerning truth *and* meaning, including perception *and* even acting.

⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, 1972), 110.

⁵¹ Yes, the proverbial understanding arm.

⁵² *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 399.

⁵³ “Understanding and Politics”, 322. Italics added.

III. Human reality or the common world

In my proposed interpretation of Arendt's notion of common sense, I refer to it as an understanding of *human reality*. In the previous section I discussed understanding, now I will turn to Arendt's view that, instead of looking for essences and underlying principles, our attention should be directed at the experience of phenomena. As we will see, according to Arendt we live in a world of appearances, and appearing is existing. In the last section we will see that, with Arendt, the Greek *polis* is paradigmatic for a space which allows human beings to appear to each other, to create a common and intersubjective world and thus to have a common life of speech and action.

A world of appearances

In *Thinking*, Arendt strongly objects to the classical distinction between (true) Being, and (mere or illusory) appearance, which she calls the two-worlds metaphysical fallacy and which she ascribes to Plato: the distinction between a true world, the world of ideas only accessible to philosophers, and the illusory world of common man.⁵⁴ According to Arendt "*Being and Appearing coincide.*"⁵⁵ Arendt stresses the artificial character of Being as a 'thought-thing.' She draws attention to the feeling of realness that accompanies experience:

Being, since Parmenides the highest concept of Western philosophy, is a thought-thing that we do not expect to be perceived by the senses or to cause a sensation, whereas realness is akin to sensation; a feeling of realness (or irrealness) actually accompanies all the sensations of my senses, which without it would not make "sense."⁵⁶

Arendt argues for the 'primacy of appearance', being *is* appearing, what does not appear does not exist:

The primacy of appearance is a fact of everyday life which neither the scientist nor the philosopher can ever escape, to which they must always return from their laboratories and studies, and which shows its strength by never being in the least changed or deflected by whatever they may have discovered when they withdrew from it. "Thus the 'strange' notions of the new physics . . . [surprise] common sense . . . without changing anything of its categories."⁵⁷

Arendt makes two observations. First, she notes that all justifications in the natural sciences have to be grounded in sense perceptions, either directly or

⁵⁴ *Thinking*, 23f, 42.

⁵⁵ *Thinking*, 19.

⁵⁶ *Thinking*, 51.

⁵⁷ *Thinking*, 24. Arendt is quoting Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.

indirectly using instruments whose readings ultimately also are read using senses. Second, the new notions, such as in physics atoms or mass or law of gravitation, or, as an example in psychology, the so called mirror neurons or different areas in the brain, don't replace our common sense (lifeworld) categories, such as objects with their weight or people feeling empathy or having difficulty with planning. Using Arendt's example, we keep living in a world in which "the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening,"⁵⁸ despite our knowledge that the earth turns around the sun.

According to Arendt appearances then are the primary constituents of human reality—and probably of the reality of most higher animal life forms. Arendt defines 'appearance' as "something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves."⁵⁹ The entities and organisms of which human reality consists are all capable of being perceived by the senses. For something to be considered an appearance requires that it can be "seen and heard by others". But what is included in the concept of appearance? Parekh lists "Trees, rivers, mountains, animals, or humans"⁶⁰, or the so-called 'natural kinds.'⁶¹ According to Borren, the phenomenological tradition prescribes a much broader interpretation: "'objects' are always things, events, etc."⁶² This would allow something like a 'war' also to be an appearance: you can see the destruction, you can hear bombs exploding. Following this broader interpretation, the human or 'common world' is stuffed with manifold appearances: people, houses, other animals, waiting time, arguments with friends and neighbours, wars, weight, books on history and so on. What appears can be both material and immaterial. The most basic characteristic of human life is his being-between-men (*inter homines esse*)⁶³—that is what makes him a political being. When we evaluate our life, or tell stories about the lives of others, a major concern is with the 'web of relationships'⁶⁴ of which the actor is a member. Such 'objects' are highly intangible and we consequently depend to a large extent on the opinions of

⁵⁸ *Thinking*, 53.

⁵⁹ *The Human Condition*, 49.

⁶⁰ Parekh, 84.

⁶¹ "Scientific disciplines frequently divide the particulars they study into kinds and theorize about those kinds. To say that a kind is natural is to say that it corresponds to a grouping that reflects the structure of the natural world rather than the interests and actions of human beings." Alexander Bird and Emma Tobin, "Natural Kinds", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/natural-kinds/>>.

⁶² Borren, 234.

⁶³ *The Human Condition*, 7.

⁶⁴ *The Human Condition*, 181f.

others to determine our own understanding. This 'intersubjective confirmation' will be discussed under the heading of 'plurality of human individuals'.

In Arendt's view, the world of appearances conditions not only man's physical appearance and the structure, shape and modes of operation of his physical senses, but also the structures of his mind, his sense of reality and mode of acquiring knowledge.⁶⁵ Arendt writes: "Common sense ... and the feeling of realness belong to our biological apparatus."⁶⁶ Parekh explains: "appearing entities have definite shapes, sizes and forms. They impress themselves upon consciousness and attract our attention by means of these. Accordingly, we recognize, identify, remember and recall them by their sensually perceptible qualities. [...] Since in the world of appearances we are accustomed to dealing with relatively distinct, distinguishable and stable entities, we lose our bearings and feel disorientated when confronted with entities lacking form."⁶⁷

According to Arendt, a requirement for an appearance to be acknowledged is that it must stand still and remain the same sufficiently long:

Reality in a world of appearances is first of all characterized by "standing still and remaining" the same long enough to be an *object* for acknowledgement and recognition by a subject.⁶⁸

A consequence of this requirement is that we have trouble getting a grip on the phenomena of our psychic life which Arendt characterizes as an unending stream of moods and emotions which succeed and dissolve into each other with incredible rapidity and which lack the chief *worldly property* of 'standing still and remaining.'⁶⁹ Moods and emotions never stay the same long enough for us to identify them. Arendt writes: "it is misleading to speak even of inner "appearances"; all we know are inner sensations whose relentless succession prevents any of them from assuming a lasting, identifiable shape."⁷⁰ Often our very awareness of them intensifies or weakens them and changes their character. In Arendt's view, this is one of the reasons why we cannot identify with any degree of accuracy the motives of our actions and the states of our minds, and why the human heart is universally acknowledged to be a 'dark' place.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Parekh, 84.

⁶⁶ *Thinking*, 52.

⁶⁷ Parekh, 85.

⁶⁸ *Thinking*, 45.

⁶⁹ *Thinking*, 40.

⁷⁰ *Thinking*, 39.

⁷¹ *The Human Condition*, 244 and Parekh, 85.

The polis – the common space of appearance

Ancient Athens is Arendt's model⁷² for the space of appearance and a society of 'speech and action.' The polis which was instituted after the Trojan wars, "physically secured by the wall around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws":

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. "Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*": these famous words became not merely the watchword of Greek colonization, they expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.⁷³

It seems to be specifically this aspect, the polis as representing a space of appearance where equal citizens come together to debate public concerns, that Hinchman considers the most important element in Arendt's notion of common sense:

common sense is a consensus or shared opinion on the significance of a common life, an opinion that is internalized by all members of a political community and which prevents them from undertaking actions that would be nonsensical or violative of the imperatives of public existence and its preservation.⁷⁴

The "common life" for Arendt would then point to "a life of speech and action", and "the imperatives of public existence" to the law and the Athenian form of democracy, which both need to be protected against barbarism. Pleading for Hinchman's interpretation of 'common sense' as a "shared opinion on the significance of a common life" is that it may be considered a—yet more fundamental—condition of possibility for the conditions argued for in this paper. However, the disadvantage of defining common sense so abstractly is that it makes it less clear what to look for when deciding if in a certain situation the conditions for common sense are met. These conditions are the subject of the next two chapters.

⁷² She acknowledges: "Not historically, of course, but speaking metaphorically and theoretically."

⁷³ *The Human Condition*, 198.

⁷⁴ Hinchman, 326.

IV. Plurality

Our understanding of the world is not an 'objective' one, as with the detached observer in science. Instead, our understanding is rooted in our enduring involvement in the common world. Each person during his life develops his own perspective, including ideas about what is true and important. Acknowledging 'perspectivism' does not imply the idea of a shared reality to crumble into relativism and scepticism because our experience of reality builds on 'commonness'. It is this 'commonness' on which Arendt's concept of 'plurality'—the topic of this chapter—relies.

In *Thinking* Arendt writes:

In a world of appearances, filled with error and semblance, reality is guaranteed by this three-fold commonness: the five senses, utterly different from each other, have the same object in common; members of the same species have the same context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning; and all other sense-endowed beings, though perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, agree on its identity. Out of this threefold commonness arises the *sensation* of reality.⁷⁵

We know that the appearances we perceive are really 'out there' because the subjectivity of the it-appears-to-me is remedied by the fact that the same thing also appears to others—though its mode of appearance may be different. The sense of reality with which perceivers experience objects is grounded in three forms of commonness. First, the five senses have the same object in common, the object that is the focus of our current attention. Second, what is considered an object—for example a table—differs between species, but generally speaking members of the same species will agree on it. In the case of the table, the *meaning* for humans is—amongst others—a place to convene by in the *context* of eating together or other settings which involve tables. In short, members of the same species have the same contexts in common that endow objects with their usual meanings. Thirdly, all other sense-endowed beings confirm the existence of the object. A bird may not understand why humans make tables, but by actually sitting on it the bird confirms the table's reality. In all three aspects discussed the commonness is a form of convergence: of the different senses to the object, of humans, in different contexts, as to the meaning of the objects, and of all other living creatures to the actual reality of the world. The quality of commonness only has meaning in relation to the possibility of difference which implies the possibility of doubt. Arendt extensively argues that it is not possible to remove

⁷⁵ *Thinking*, 50.

doubt by turning to the certainty consciousness of the self, as in Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*⁷⁶. Neither are we reassured by scientific research—Arendt argues that on the contrary science only undermines our sense of certainty about the obvious. Instead, Arendt claims that human reassurance against the background of inevitable doubt is to be found in plurality.⁷⁷ In the current context of securing the realness of an object, exactly the same evidence provided by identical sources is not convincing. Multiple non-identical sources, per contra, together proffering accordant evidence do render a sense of certainty or realness. Arendt distinguishes three interrelated types of plurality: plurality of the senses; plurality of objects; and plurality of human individuals; on which I will elaborate in the next sections.

Plurality of the senses and the sixth sense

The first commonness concerns objects being perceived. This perception involves the plurality of the five senses, which, “utterly different from each other, have the same object in common.”⁷⁸ Each sense provides its very specific type of information: sight contributes visual information, smell olfactory information, touch tactile information, etcetera. Arendt writes: “It is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality and are not merely felt as irritations of our nerves or resistance sensations of our bodies.”⁷⁹ The different forms of information from the senses need to be bound together into one ‘mental representation’ of what is perceived. This process of binding together information of the different senses is since Aristotle⁸⁰ considered a major conceptual problem because “they cannot be translated into each other—no sound can be seen, no image can be heard, and so on—”.⁸¹ The problem of synaesthesia is addressed in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty): how can the senses “play together” if they can’t communicate with each other because they don’t experience the same sense impressions? If the ears report they hear music,

⁷⁶ *The Human Condition*, 278f, *The Life of the Mind*, 48f.

⁷⁷ Plurality refers to the being in the plural as characteristic of the world's appearances. It is opposed to monism. “There are actually two distinct sources of evidence for existence pluralism: intuition and perception. Where Russell seems to be appealing to his “common-sense belief,” Moore seems to be appealing directly to the content of perception, as do Hoffman and Rosenkrantz: Monism... is inconsistent with something that appears to be an evident datum of experience, namely, that there is a plurality of things. We shall assume that a plurality of material things exists, and hence that monism is false.” Jonathan Schaffer, “Monism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/monism/>>.

⁷⁸ *Thinking*, 40.

⁷⁹ *The Human Condition*, 208.

⁸⁰ According to Snir, 365, koine aesthesis is the Greek equivalent of common sense.

⁸¹ *Thinking*, 119.

the eyes will be confused because they know what dancing is, but nothing about sound and music. Arendt writes:

What since Thomas Aquinas we call common sense, the *sensus communis* is a kind of sixth sense needed to keep my five senses together and guarantee that it is the same object that I see, touch, taste, smell, and hear; it is the "one faculty [that] extends to all objects of the five senses."⁸²

Applying the example of music as the object of the auditive sense and dancing as the object of vision (and proprioception if we participate) to the above quote makes clear that, according to Arendt, only common sense makes it possible to have the experience of dancing to music. Common sense keeps the information of the different senses "in tune", not just with each other, but especially with the worldly context. The latter would possibly consist of other people dancing, the location of a dance hall, the event of going out with friends. These elements of the worldly context will be discussed in the next two sections about the plurality of objects and that of other individuals.

According to Arendt the language faculty also plays a significant role in the identification of the object. It does so by giving each object its common name, "corresponding to or following common sense". This "serves to identify a datum that appears altogether differently to each of the five senses: hard or soft when I touch it, sweet or bitter when I taste it, bright or dark when I see it, sounding in different tones when I hear it. None of these sensations can be adequately described in words".⁸³ Following this reasoning, language, or having names for objects, may be assumed to be a strong reinforcer of the sense of reality of objects.

Arendt often uses the expression 'sixth sense' as a synonym for common sense when she wants to stress that the primary source of our accumulated experience are sense perceptions. For example, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she writes that the inhabitant of Hitler's Third Reich, with regard to competing powers, such as the civil services, the party, SS and SA, "had to develop a kind of sixth sense to know at a given moment whom to obey and whom to disregard."⁸⁴

reason depend[s] not upon single sense perceptions, each of which may be an illusion, but upon the unquestioned assumption that the senses as a whole— kept together and ruled over by common sense,

⁸² *Thinking*, 50.

⁸³ *Thinking*, 118.

⁸⁴ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 399.

the sixth and the highest sense—fit man into the reality which surrounds him.⁸⁵

We can apply the above quote to the example of the Third Reich's competing powers. The inhabitants could both see and hear what was the result of disobedience towards the SA or the SS. Single events may not be representative and lead to wrong conclusions, but the combined and repeated perceptions build up an experience with the powers. And the inhabitants are reasonable enough to adapt their behaviour accordingly. Summarizing, the main importance of the *plurality of the senses* is that it supplies different types of information about material objects. The 'common sense' 'mental organ' or faculty allows humans to integrate these alternate types of information from different senses into a unified experience of reality. This experience will also inform the human about immaterial concerns, for example air pollution, either as direct perception (smog), or indirectly when hearing or reading about it (the long term health effects).

Plurality of objects

The second commonness concerns *context*. Arendt observes that "members of the same species have the same context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning"⁸⁶

the "sensation" of reality, of sheer thereness, relates to the context in which single objects appear as well as to the context in which we ourselves as appearances exist among other appearing creatures.⁸⁷

All objects in the world of appearances are invariably accompanied by other dissimilar objects whose presence constitutes its context—when this is not the case it results in a sense of unreality. For human beings this context involves both the worldly objects and the fact that we inhabit the earth amongst other living creatures.

Everything that exists among a plurality of things is not simply what it is, in its identity, but it is also different from other things; this being different belongs to its very nature.⁸⁸

We recognize and secure a mental grip on an object by identifying its 'distinguishing' characteristics. That is by recognizing *both* what it is *and* is not.

⁸⁵ *The Human Condition*, 273.

⁸⁶ *Thinking*, 50.

⁸⁷ *Thinking*, 51.

⁸⁸ *Thinking*, 183.

Arendt argues: “When we say what a thing is, we must say what it is *not* or we would speak in tautologies.”⁸⁹

I will now illustrate all this with a historical example. The “confessions” of political opponents in the Soviet Union were all phrased in the same language and admitted the same motives. In itself, a single confession need not be doubted. The fact that two objects are identical in itself would be no reason for doubt either—two marbles can be identical. However, these confessions have a context of dissimilar objects: of political trials, judges being dependent on the regime. As members of the same species, we are familiar with trials and being judged. We understand what a confession means and know that each confession refers to events that are never equal: “this being different belongs to its very nature”. Only the hearing of ‘distinguishing’ characteristics will assure us that we know the whole truth and are not just being deluded. In the case of identical confessions “common sense tells us that it is precisely their consistency which is out of this world and proves that they are a fabrication.”⁹⁰

To summarize, the significance of the plurality of the objects for the sense of reality is that both other objects and other human beings provide its context, the latter do so by conferring its meaning. It is this plurality in the context that attaches to an object its property of realness. Arendt acknowledges the elusive character of the ‘context’, “the context qua context never appears entirely.”⁹¹ Further, common sense interprets absence of difference between similar objects as a sign of being unreal.

Plurality of human individuals

The third and final commonness of an object refers to the property that “all other sense-endowed beings, though perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, agree on its identity.” According to Arendt this even applies to strictly material objects:

Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our common sense which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous.⁹²

The requirement of a plurality of the human individuals as perceiving agents for establishing reality is even more important than the plurality of the senses and

⁸⁹ *Thinking*, 183.

⁹⁰ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 352.

⁹¹ *Thinking*, 51.

⁹² *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 475.

the plurality of objects. According to Parekh,⁹³ Arendt's concept of human plurality consists of three interrelated conditions, namely separateness, independence and uniqueness. First, each individual is *physically separate* and *separable from others* for an observer—which is true for all objects. Second, unless for some reason incapacitated, each human individual is an *autonomous and independent self*, capable of preserving his integrity against the pressures of the world. The agreement or confirmation of a child, a slave, a yes-man, or any other dependent, should not reassure us. Neither do the views of men under group psychosis or subject to a common delusion help to establish the reality of the world.⁹⁴ Correspondingly, Sandra Hinchman argues that the views held in a *traditional Gemeinschaft*, being an apolitical community based not on autonomy and independence but on domination and subordination, should not be considered as representing a form of common sense. Hinchman thus confirms the thesis defended here that plurality is a precondition for common sense.

The third and final element in human plurality is that *each human being is unique* in the sense that he is not only endowed with distinctive natural gifts and talents but also a *personality*, which “like the *daimon* in Greek religion accompanies each man throughout his life.”⁹⁵ As Arendt puts it, he is not merely a ‘what’, a possessor of specific physical intellectual moral and other attributes, but also a ‘who’, a distinct and distinguishable *person*. Parekh explains Arendt's ideas on the ‘who’ are as follows:

By and large, she seems to think like Socrates that each individual has a certain personality, an indefinable but unmistakable quality which pervades everything he says or does, gives his words and actions a certain tone, and accounts for the distinctive atmosphere his presence creates. In her view, a man's ‘who’ is only visible to others who catch partial glimpses of it in his words and deeds.⁹⁶

According to Arendt, our *sense of our own reality* is also intersubjectively derived, just like our sense of the reality of the world. Arendt observes:

Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses -lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed,

⁹³ Parekh, 86f.

⁹⁴ Hinchman, 329.

⁹⁵ *The Human Condition*, 179.

⁹⁶ *Thinking*, 183 and Parekh, 84.

deprivatized and deindividualized as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.⁹⁷

To make our innermost feelings 'real' they must be talked about. This way they can appear to others and acquire a measure of reality.

Arendt refers to Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'perceptual faith' to explain that we do not constantly need people around us to be reassured of the reality of our perceptions. Perceptual faith is a sense of certainty that what appears to us exists independently of us and that our perceptions are not illusions. This sense of certainty accumulates during our experience with objects in the company of others and carries over to the way we experience objects when we are on our own.⁹⁸ Arendt argues that left to ourselves each of us would remain shut up in the subjectivity of his own sensations and stream of consciousness, incapable of distinguishing between reality and illusion and even incapable of forming a sense of reality. In the world of appearances, we guarantee each other's reality as well as guarantee each other the reality of the world. In the *Kant Lectures*, Arendt remarks that the opposite of common sense is actually insanity, characterized by *sensus privatus*: a "logical faculty" that "lead[s] to insane results precisely because it has separated itself from the experience that can be valid and validated only in the presence of others."⁹⁹ People that lack common sense live in worlds all their own; they are unable to conceive of how the world appears to others.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *The Human Condition*, 50.

⁹⁸ *Thinking*, 46.

⁹⁹ *Kant Lectures*, 64, 71.

¹⁰⁰ Hinchman, 325.

V. Communication

As we saw in the previous section on plurality, each person experiences the world from a different perspective. To augment our necessarily partial and limited perceptions of the world we compare and discuss our experiences with others. Also, to act in concert, in accordance with our understanding of the situation, language is required for coordination. In *Thinking* Arendt writes: “it is not because man is a thinking being but because he exists only in the plural that his reason, too, wants communication and is likely to go astray if derived of it.”¹⁰¹ Communication thus is the second requirement for the valid understanding that constitutes the common world.

In this section I show that different elements are involved in communication that in their specific way add to common sense. Firstly, *language* gives objects a common name, without which meaningful communication between human beings would not be possible. Second, experiences that are not yet common can only become so by making *public appearance*, by speaking about it. Third, to have significance, *speech* requires a dynamic of creating distance and its subsequent bridging. The most effective and ‘objective’ way for conveying meaning is a *story*. This form of communicating draws attention to all relevant elements in the context. Finally, ‘representative thinking’ allows me to present my case in a way that is convincing to my audience or opponents, thereby increasing its intersubjective validity.

Language

In *Thinking*, Arendt observes that the language capability plays a central constitutive role in our *sense of reality* by giving “an object its common name”. Having a common name “serves to identify a datum that appears altogether differently to each of the five senses: hard or soft when I touch it, sweet or bitter when I taste it, bright or dark when I see it, sounding in different tones when I hear it. None of these sensations can be adequately described in words.”¹⁰² Even more important, the common name is “the decisive factor for intersubjective communication—the same object being perceived by different persons and common to them.”¹⁰³ Hinchman proposes that *because* common sense works primarily by comparisons of perspectives (plurality), it depends to an extraordinary degree on nuances of language.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ *Thinking*, 99.

¹⁰² *Thinking*, 118.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Hinchman, 324.

Mathematics is generally considered to be also a language because it has a syntax, uses terms, etcetera. However, according to Arendt it is not a natural language suitable for representing the concerns of the human world. She considers experts who are so used to practicing such artificial language in their thinking a threat: “The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists *qua* scientists is ... the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about.”¹⁰⁵

Publicity

In Arendt’s *The Human Condition* the distinction between private and public is prominent. In *The Human Condition* Arendt explains ‘public’ as follows:

everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality.¹⁰⁶

Publicity then is the quality of being public, the condition or fact of being open to public observation or knowledge. What is private, “intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—” leads “an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence”¹⁰⁷

Before private things can enter the intersubjective or common world, they need to evoke some form of public attention—usually by means of speech, which is discussed in the next section. They need to be “transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized ... into a shape to fit them for public appearance.”¹⁰⁸ Only after a concern has made public appearance, has acquired publicity, we can start recognizing it as ‘common sense’. Take for example the notion of a third gender. A long time this was an unacknowledged possibility. It was ‘common sense’ that a person is either male or female. Only by bringing private experiences into the open and giving them publicity a new ‘common sense’ allowing for more sexes may develop. The more publicly known this new possibility gets, the more ‘common’ it will become, and people will start recognizing its appearance. Ultimately, if a new appearance is successful, it may become part-and-parcel of the common world and will be considered ‘common sense.’

¹⁰⁵ *The Human Condition*, 4.

¹⁰⁶ *The Human Condition*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* According to Arendt, these transformations occur in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Speech

Speech is the act of bringing a concern to the foreground. Arendt uses the term speech in its original Greek sense of *logos* or reasoned and articulate communication. Speech here also includes written communication. It can take many forms such as debate, discussion, non-purposive exchange of opinions, conversation and storytelling—which is Arendt’s form of choice. Whatever its form, speech has two essential functions: first, to create space between men and second, to overcome it. The more formal a mode of speech, the greater its capacity to create space.¹⁰⁹ Places with a great capacity to create space are public forums where one can hold speeches and political meetings with active debate. What is required is an audience (public) capable of appreciating the excellence of one’s performance (constituted by one’s peers). In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes:

Every activity performed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public, constituted by one’s peers, it cannot be the casual, familiar presence of one’s equals or inferiors.¹¹⁰

Excellence may be considered to add to common sense as follows. When going public, more effort is put into the quality of one’s argument, including imagining what is important for the audience and making one’s viewpoint more representative. Such excellence makes the act memorable. As an example, both Kant and Darwin spent many years in developing their argument. Their main ideas subsequently entered into the intellectual inheritance, helped the building of the common world and ultimately became popular ‘common sense.’

Storytelling

Arendt considers stories to be an indispensable means of communication for conveying important insights to an audience. By stories, Arendt “means everything from the casual anecdotes told by friends over dinner or by parents to children, to novels and short stories, to the narratives and essays she herself wrote for *The New Yorker and Commentary*.”¹¹¹ Stories reflect the lived experience. Arendt writes: “My assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by

¹⁰⁹ Parekh, 93.

¹¹⁰ *The Human Condition*, 49.

¹¹¹ Lisa Disch, "MORE TRUTH THAN FACT: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (1993): 668, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591793021004006>.

which to take its bearings."¹¹² Lisa Disch, in her essay "MORE TRUTH THAN FACT: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt" argues that Arendt, when writing *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, specifically sought a way of writing that "would engage her readers in making a critical response to that phenomenon. In answer to this problem, she writes an explicitly moral narrative that situates totalitarianism in the context of her reaction to it as a thinker whose ethical tradition it has destroyed and tells the story of totalitarianism from as many perspectives as she can imagine."¹¹³ Such an approach has the advantage over a scientific way of writing that it not only presents the 'historical facts', but also conveys meaning, the evaluative aspects of what is represented. Contrary to common thinking, "the most "objective" way to write about a social question or problem is to situate it in the context of the beliefs that gave rise to it. This means telling the story of a situation in a way that makes explicit the disposition of the author and relates as many of its constituent perspectives as possible."¹¹⁴ An obvious example is re-telling the stories of survivors of concentration camps. A story can be a more powerful critical force than a theoretical analysis. This reference to 'context' above shows the 'plurality of objects' discussed earlier in action. The concept of storytelling resembles Kant's idea of exemplary validity, where the example discloses generality without surrendering particularity. Stories are what we remember, they structure our thought—and may even, as language does, condition our common sense:

common sense is only that part of our mind and that portion of inherited wisdom which all men have in common in any given civilization¹¹⁵

In *Kant Lectures*, Arendt exemplifies how stories shared in a society constitute this inherited wisdom inherited: "When judging, one says spontaneously, without any derivations from general rules, "This man has courage." If one were a Greek, one would have in "the depths of one's mind" the example of Achilles. Imagination is again necessary: one must have Achilles present even though he certainly is absent. If we say of somebody that he is good, we have in the back of our minds the example of Saint Francis or Jesus of Nazareth. The judgment has exemplary validity to the extent that the example is rightly chosen."¹¹⁶

¹¹² Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 14.

¹¹³ Disch, 668.

¹¹⁴ Disch, 689.

¹¹⁵ "Understanding and Politics", 316

¹¹⁶ *Kant Lectures*, 84.

Representative thinking

The distancing that occurs between individuals when they express different opinions—which in turn reflect their different experiences and personality (see the section on the ‘plurality of human individuals’)—can be resolved only by the use of *imagination*: “the faculty of having present [in the mind] what is absent [from current perception].”¹¹⁷ Both the distancing and the bridging that occurs when they exchange arguments are indispensable parts of what Arendt calls the dialogue of understanding.¹¹⁸

In the essay “Truth and Politics” Arendt argues that *political thought*, thinking about the concerns of the common world, should be *representative*. Before entering the debate, I prepare my opinion “by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent”. Arendt elaborates:

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; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. 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.¹¹⁹

Representative thinking means understanding and acknowledging what is important for the other persons involved. Plausibly, this having an ‘enlarged mind’ will allow for more appropriate actions in ‘word and deeds’, making a better fit into the reality which surrounds him [the agent]’ – which according to Arendt is the *raison d’être* of common sense.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ *Kant Lectures*, 67.

¹¹⁸ “Understanding and Politics”, 323.

¹¹⁹ Arendt, “Truth and Politics” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 237.

¹²⁰ *The Human Condition*, 274.

VI. Conclusion

Common sense plays a central role in the work of Hannah Arendt. A rough division is possible: in her early work the notion is primarily political, later she is focussed on understanding it as a mental activity or faculty—but always against the background of the barbarous events at the start of the twentieth century which she characterizes as *loss of common sense*.

I have argued that Arendt's notion of common sense refers to having a valid understanding of human reality, enabled by the conditions of plurality and communication.

Understanding of human reality reflects Arendt's phenomenological orientation towards the lived experience. It is concerned with the lifeworld, the common, to a large extent intersubjective, world. It includes both cognitive ('truth') and evaluative elements ('meaning'); it includes judging and 'acting accordingly'.

I have argued that common sense should not be equated with 'preliminary understanding' (*Vorverständnis*). The latter misses the qualification—of *validity*—that the former has. It misses a grounding in—mostly societal—conditions that free the individual from his isolated and as such limited perspective. It is the presence of these favourable conditions that enable valid understanding; its lack is what causes the spread of stupidity in the Kantian sense.¹²¹ This *validity of understanding* is not an absolute, conditions for understanding can be more or less favourable. A judgment or action may be more or less commonsensical, excellent or plain stupid, which is up to others to decide—in public debate.¹²² The notion of a *conditioned* and *measured* validity of understanding of human reality enables us to make sense of Arendt's key notion of *loss of common sense*.

So, it is certain (societal) conditions that enable valid understanding. But why specifically plurality and communication? Why not education or the spread of

¹²¹ "Understanding and Politics", 314. Arendt on the same page illustrates what she means by this stupidity: "We know of no civilization before ours in which people were gullible enough to form their buying habits in accordance with the maxim that "selfpraise is the highest recommendation," the assumption of all advertising. ...or is it likely that any century before ours could have been persuaded to take seriously a therapy which is said to help only if the patients pay a lot of money to those who administer it"

¹²² Beiner in "Rereading Hannah Arendt's Kant Lectures" *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 23, no. 1 (1997), page 26, remarks among a similar line: "[Arendt] does not fully appreciate that all her favourite concepts from the third Critique (common sense, enlarged mentality, etc.) are transcendental categories: they do not connect judgments of taste to any empirical sociability (taste, as Kant construes it, is no more dependent on social relations than practical reason is), but merely specify conditions of intersubjective validity that are presumed when an individual subject presumes to judge something beautiful by reflecting on it without necessarily consulting the opinions or experiences of other judging individuals."

information or democracy, or any other well-chosen set of societal parameters? The answer to the latter question is simple. If we are to explicate Arendt's notion of commonsense, we need to stick with her frame of reference: the characteristic conditions of human life.¹²³ As a second criterion for choosing is whether Arendt is explicit how it can be considered a condition that enables commonsense. Alternatively, a topic may be admitted if such an enabling role can reasonably be argued for.

The first group of enabling conditions for commonsense is *plurality*. Arendt distinguishes three forms of plurality. The *plurality of the senses* refers to the fact that multiple senses supply different forms of information about objects and events in the world. These senses need to play together but are incompatible. Arendt speaks of the 'commonsense' (*sensus communis* or sixth sense) as a 'mental organ' or 'faculty', which allows humans to integrate these alternate types of information from different senses into a unified experiencing of reality. The *plurality of objects* provides an object with its context. Both other objects in its surroundings and other human beings and their behaviour are part of the context. Both the plurality of the senses and the context add to an object its quality of realness. The requirement of a *plurality of the human individuals* as perceiving agents is even more important for establishing reality than the plurality of the senses and the plurality of objects. Arendt's concept of human plurality consists of three interrelated conditions: separateness, independence and uniqueness. Independence is needed to guarantee that an individual's opinions and attitudes are authentic and not a copy of that of his master, parent, boss or leader. Further the uniqueness of individuals is needed. Arendt assumes that each individual has a personality of his own, reflecting his temperament, personal history, background, etcetera. Expressing different opinions, communicating experiences and telling stories—see *Communication below*—only makes sense when there are such differences between individuals. Differences enrich in all kinds of ways the totality of experience available in society. Having many perspectives available adds to the sense of reality—which Arendt considers the hallmark of commonsense.

The second group of enabling conditions for commonsense is *Communication*. Language gives the plurality of objects a common name. Speech allows the sharing of experiences and the building of the common world. Stories are a rich and engaging medium for communicating experiences and meaning. It is stories that we remember and that structure our thought—and thus may condition our commonsense. Representative thinking means understanding and

¹²³ See for example Borren, page 236, for a short explanation of Arendt's phenomenological anthropology in relation to the human conditions.

acknowledging what is important for the others. Having an 'enlarged mind' will allow for a better fit of one's actions in the common world.

In total then we identified eight conditions that enable common sense. Because eight is a lot to remember, I will attempt to give a practical interpretation or slogan for each of them:¹²⁴

Plurality of the senses: don't rely on reports, see for yourself.

Plurality of objects: don't trust it when your opinion gets more and more confirmed (don't trust Facebook).

Plurality of human individuals: ask people of different backgrounds, who aren't dependent on you, for alternative opinions.

Language: by having more nuance available in one's vocabulary, whatever the subject one can more accurately describe its import or meaning.¹²⁵

Speech: freedom of speech requires public spaces of appearance.

Storytelling: stories are what we remember, they structure our thought.

Representative thinking: consider a given issue from different viewpoints, make present to the mind the standpoints of those who are absent.

In this paper I have argued that the specified conditions of plurality and communication allow us to assess, not whether our understanding is correct, but to what extent the public context is conducive to the understanding of the political. This reference to the context is fully in line with Arendt's account of the 'loss of common sense' which she considered the problematic of the modern age. On a more positive note, the thesis may suggest which elements in the political context bolster public 'common sense' and consequently a flourishing society.

¹²⁴ We might call them 'Arendt's tactics for common sense'.

¹²⁵ Resembling "The limits of my language stand for the limits of my world."—Wittgenstein?

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