FILOZOFIA
Volume 80, Number 4, 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2025.80.4.5

Truth, Plurality, and Political Phenomenology: Hannah Arendt's Socrates

ANTOINE PAGEAU-ST-HILAIRE, Department of Philosophy, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

PAGEAU-ST-HILAIRE, A.: Truth, Plurality, and Political Phenomenology: Hannah Arendt's Socrates
FILOZOFIA, 80, 2025, No 4, pp. 530 – 544

This paper examines Hannah Arendt's Socrates. I argue that Arendt construes Socrates as a model of the compatibility of philosophy and politics. This model uniquely articulates this compatibility through a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, where truth is conceived as a perspectival disclosure of meaning in the plural and discursive world of politics. I further contend that the more solitary features of Arendt's Socrates (thinking as internal dialogue, and speechless wonder) also contribute to the political realm as a site of truth.

Keywords: Arendt – Socrates – truth – hermeneutics – phenomenology – plurality

Who is Hannah Arendt's Socrates? It is neither the Platonic Socrates, nor Xenophon's Socrates. But it is also not the historical Socrates (Arendt 1977, 1, 168). Instead, she compares her portrayal of Socrates to the construction of ideal-types, whereby we "transform a historical figure into a model and assign to it a definite representative function" (Arendt 1977, 1, 168). Such construction selects an individual because they "possessed a representative significance in reality which needed only some purification in order to reveal its full meaning" (Arendt 1977, 1, 168). Arendt's Socrates is a model she constructs, an ideal-type that she purifies from Plato's texts to highlight its representative function.

This methodological warning should suffice to neutralize worries scholars have raised concerning how faithful to the Platonic dialogues Arendt is when she interprets Socrates.[1] I am not suggesting that we should accept Arendt's

[1] See, e.g., Villa (1999), Lavallée (2018), Caravero (2019, 36, 41).

reading of Plato or that we should abstain from assessing it critically. Rather, I submit that if we take for granted that she is *not* particularly faithful to the Platonic dialogues and that her philosophic intent lies elsewhere when she constructs her Socratic model, we may think along with her about what she hopes we can learn from that ideal type. Instead of offering a Platonic rejoinder to her Socratic proposal, I will here examine the very thing that is at issue in Arendt's portrayal of Socrates.

What is at issue? What does her Socrates stand for? Put simply, Arendt's Socrates exemplifies the *forgotten compatibility between philosophy and politics*. Her diagnosis of that forgetfulness is that Plato is responsible for the oblivion of politics proper and this oblivion is intimately tied to a transformation of our understanding of truth. In this respect, Arendt's narrative parallels Heidegger's own narrative concerning the forgetfulness of being in the history of Western thinking, but the parallel involves a twofold departure. First, for Arendt, the issue is not *Seinsvergessenheit* but *Politikvergessenheit*.[2] Second, the proclamation of Platonism's guilt in this forgetting leads Heidegger to leap back to pre-Socratic early Greek thinkers, whereas it leads Arendt to recover the Socratic soil that Plato had allegedly abandoned. In that respect, Arendt at once resembles and distinguishes herself from other students of Heidegger who sought to appropriate Greek thought in response to their master. While thinkers like Gadamer or Patočka attempted to re-Socratize Plato[3] to challenge the Heideggerian critique of Platonism, Arendt de-Platonizes Socrates to articulate a different kind of critique of both Heidegger and Plato.[4]

In this essay, I examine Arendt's appropriation of the figure of Socrates in light of that phenomenological background. While the phenomenological character of Arendt's thought is increasingly recognized, scholars have barely assessed the exemplary role that Socrates plays in that regard.[5] If her exemplary, "purified" Socrates indeed embodies the potential compatibility of philosophy and politics, I shall argue that it must be understood phenomenologically. Specifically, I contend that Arendt articulates with the help of her Socrates a hermeneutic phenomenology of the political.[6] This hermeneutic phenomenology fully acknowledges the finitude of philosophy,

[2] Cf. Abensour (2007, 363) and Loidolt (2018, 80) on forgetfulness of action in Arendt.

[3] Cf. Renaud (1999).

[4] On such Platonic critics of Heidegger, see my Pageau-St-Hilaire (2025).

[5] See especially Loidolt (2018), but also Tassin (2017, 70 – 132), Borren (2013), and Taminiaux (1996). On Arendt and Heidegger, see Taminiaux (1997), Villa (1996), and Cassin (1990).

[6] On Arendt's hermeneutics, see Vasterling (2011), Borren (2013), and Loidolt (2018, 77 – 82).

and, accordingly, embraces an account of truth as a plural and discursive perspectival disclosure of meaning. While some scholars have seen a tension between Arendt's analyses of Socrates' public inquiry on the one hand, and of his solitary or private thinking on the other,[7] I argue that they are complementary activities: for Socrates, both the two-in-one of the inner dialogue and the solitary experience of wonder contribute to the public realm as the site of truth.

I. Socrates, Truth, and the Space of Appearance

For Arendt, political philosophy was born with Plato, not Socrates. Yet it is intimately tied with Socrates insofar as it represents Plato's response to the trial of Socrates. Platonic political philosophy as she construes it is based on the repudiation of the πόλις as a radically unhomely place for the philosopher. But she insists that Plato's resentful departure from the political life is at once a departure from his master: "the death of Socrates made Plato…*doubt* certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings" (Arendt 1990, 73). Because Socrates failed to persuade the Athenians of the truth of his innocence, Plato doubted "the validity of *persuasion*" and rhetoric altogether, i.e., of the "specifically political form of speech" (Arendt 1990, 73). Plato's vindicative reaction went further: since persuasion and rhetoric are embedded in opinion, he "furiously" opposed δόξα and yearned "for absolute standards": "Platonic truth, even when *doxa* is not mentioned, is always understood as the very opposite of opinion" (Arendt 1990, 74). With this opposition, the gulf between philosophy and politics was opened.

This separation, Arendt contends, is Plato's "most anti-Socratic conclusion" (Arendt 1990, 75). Accordingly, one of the Socratic teachings that Plato doubted is the compatibility between truth and opinion. To grasp properly this compatibility, we have to appreciate a crucial feature that Arendt attributes to the Platonic position. Plato's yearning for "absolute standards," which drove him to elaborate his "doctrine of ideas," is an "eminent example" of the "thought trains…whereby men, since time immemorial, have tried to think rationally *beyond the limits of human knowledge*" (Arendt 1968, 231; my emphasis). In other words, Plato transgresses the inherent limits, the *finitude* pertaining to the human condition. By contrast, Socrates' self-knowledge is a deep awareness of such finitude, namely the awareness that "absolute truth… independent of each man's existence, *cannot exist for mortals* (Arendt 1990, 84;

[7] Most notably Villa (1999). Vallée (1999) offers a more unified picture of Arendt's Socrates.

my emphasis).[8] If emancipating truth from δόξα altogether is a negation of human finitude, it is also a flight from the human condition of plurality insofar as it proclaims the *unum verum* as independent from it. By accepting our mortality, Socrates embraces plurality as the "law of the earth" (Arendt 1977, 1, 19, 187) and tries to draw the full implications of this condition of ours for his truth-seeking activity.

"The limitations of truth for mortals" is "its limitations through *dokein*, appearances" (Arendt 1990, 85). But for Socrates, appearances are not mere illusions or falsehoods as they are for Plato. Arendt subscribes to, and ascribes to Socrates, a phenomenological understanding of appearance. Following Husserl's famous "*soviel Schein*, *soviel Sein*" principle (Arendt 1990, 85), she asserts that "Being and Appearing coincide" (Arendt 1977, 1, 20; cf. Arendt 1957, 199).[9] Accordingly, what Socrates is concerned with by embracing appearances is nothing less than the phenomenal disclosure of the world as it shows up: "To Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, of what appears to me," and it "comprehend[s] the world as it opens itself to me" (Arendt 1990, 80).[10]

Given the principle of plurality, the world is disclosed differently to me and to others, for each human being is distinctly situated withing it: "the assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it" (Arendt 1990, 80). From this perspectivism, Socrates is not lead to a skeptical relativism wherein everything boils down to "subjective fantasy and arbitrariness" (Arendt 1990, 80), for perspectives offer viewpoints from which the *same thing* is seen differently. And that is exactly how Arendt conceives of the public realm as a space of appearance, namely a space where a common world can appear through the multiplicity of its appearing perspectives:

> The "sameness" of the world, its commonness (*koinon*, as the Greeks would say, common to all) or "objectivity"…resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world – and consequently their *doxai* (opinions) – "both you and I are human" (Arendt 1990, 80).

The multiplicity of perspectives on the world is not an indication that there is no "true world" but rather our only access to this world. Thus, instead of relinquishing δόξα as unfit for truth like Plato, Socrates sets out to question his

[8] Cf. Borren (2013, 244).

[9] On Arendt's phenomenological account of appearing, see Loidolt (2018, 53 – 76).

[10] *Pace* Villa (1999), this Socratic endeavor is not merely aesthetic; it is a disclosure of truth.

fellow citizens in order to "find the truth in their *doxa*" (Arendt 1990, 81). Arendt's Socrates here reminds us of Nietzsche's hermeneutic perspectivism. In the Third Essay of the *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche indeed contends that asking the human eye to be perspective-less and impartial, an "eye turned in no direction at all," is like demanding a "non-concept of eye" (Nietzsche 2006, 87). But perspectivism for Nietzsche does not entail abandoning our desire to understand; on the contrary, it enriches our understanding:

> There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival "knowing"; the more affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our "concept" of the thing, our "objectivity" (Nietzsche 2006, 87).

Nietzsche's construal of hermeneutic understanding as a multiplying of the visual perspectives on a same thing finds an important resonance in a central idea of Husserlian phenomenology, namely that spatial objects are given to consciousness through a variety of different profiles or adumbrations (*Abschattungen*): "one and the same shape (given in person *as* the same) appears continuously again and again 'in a different way,' in profiles of shape that are always different" (Husserl 2014, 72). In a way similar to Nietzsche, Husserl thinks that the multiplication of such profiles, a process wherein the "inherent aspects of the thing…gradually come to be actually displayed," is the only way to come to apperceive what is given in one-sided profiles (Husserl 2014, 78).

There are differences between Arendt's Socrates and the hermeneutic and phenomenological insights of Nietzsche and Husserl. First, what is given through a manifold of different profiles for Arendt is, unlike for Husserl, not perceptible entities but a common world. Second, this common world is not disclosed primarily through a *seeing*, but through *speech*. For while Arendt acknowledges that a perspective is a matter of how things *appear* to me (δόκει μοι), there is no possible disclosure of such appearance apart from its discursive expression (λέξις), which externalizes the perspectival profiles and makes them appear to others. The truth-seeking method of Arendt's Socrates is a transposition of the phenomenological method of profile-variation into the realm of human speech where human beings disclose the world through discursive adumbrations.[11] Arendt thus anticipates a hermeneutic-phenomenological view that will become explicit several years later with Gadamer (1960):

[11] To my knowledge, only Taminiaux (1996, 219 – 220; 1997, 30, 204) has seen this.

> the world is not different from the views (*Ansichten*) in which it presents itself.…Seen phenomenologically, the "thing-in-itself" is, as Husserl has shown, nothing but the continuity with which the various perceptual profiles (*perspektivische Abschattungen*) on objects shade into one another. In the same way as with perception we can speak of the "linguistic shadings (*sprachliche Abschattungen*)" that the world undergoes in different language-worlds (Gadamer 2014, 464).[12]

Arendt's version of such phenomenological perspectivism differs from Husserl insofar as the multiplication of discursive profiles she proposes is always intersubjective and plural. It is intersubjective because each citizen has its own distinct perspective on the common world, but also because a genuine access to these various distinct perspectives requires that they be *thoroughly* expressed so as to appear clearly to all. Merely standing in a situation, having the world appear to me, and expressing how it appears to me is insufficient. For every appearing brings with it a risk of concealment: "every appearing thing acquires, by virtue of its appearingness, a kind of disguise that may…hide or disfigure it" (Arendt 1977, 1, 21, cf. 54).[13] This potential concealing is twofold: the way things appear to me can be hidden both to others and to myself. This is why, if the space of appearance is to be a genuine realm of disclosure, we need a Socrates:

> just as nobody can know beforehand the other's *doxa*, so nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion. Socrates wants to bring out this truth which everyone potentially possesses (Arendt 1990, 81).

Arendt thinks Socrates' maieutic art aims just at this, namely making citizens and the city "more truthful" (Arendt 1990, 81). The very idea that there are degrees of truth here indicates that the kind of truth at stake differs from both the *unum verum* of the Platonic Forms (what she also calls "rational truths") (Arendt 1990, 81) and factual truths, for these, she thinks, do not admit of a more or a less.[14] In the public realm, by contrast, the common world can be more or less true in the sense that it can be more or less disclosed, and the more the citizens' own perspectives come to the fore, the more the common matters

[12] For a different comparison of Arendt and Gadamer, see Vasterling (2011).

[13] Although Arendt does not mention him here, it is difficult not to think of Heidegger's insight into the intertwining of ἀλήθεια and λήθη.

[14] On the truth of facts (as opposed to meaning) not admitting of degrees, see Vasterling (2011, 579).

of the πόλις will be disclosed. But this perspectival disclosure does not progressively come to an end point where these matters are figured out once and for all, for the kind of truth at issue is a disclosure of meaning.[15] Disclosing and understanding meaning is an infinite task to be performed ever anew because what is illuminated can never be exhausted by any number of perspectives, no matter how well these are worked out by Socratic examination. Arendt indeed insists that the "richness of human discourse" is "inexhaustible" (Arendt 1968, 234).[16] Accordingly, the fruits of Socratic maieutic "could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth" (Arendt 1990, 81). Claiming that Plato's early dialogues were Socratic because inconclusive, she says that these did not "need a conclusion in order to be meaningful": "to have talked something through…seemed result enough" (Arendt 1990, 82).

But if that is so, how can we make sure that this "talking through" is not merely idle-talk (*Gerede*), as Heidegger (1992, 197) had feared, but genuinely disclosive? Arendt emphasizes one key criterion at play in Socrates' examination:

> For Socrates, the chief criterion for the man who speaks truthfully his own *doxa* was "that he be in agreement with himself" – that he not contradict himself and not say contradictory things, which is what most people do and yet what each of us somehow is afraid of doing (Arendt 1990, 85).

Socrates then makes his fellow citizens' opinions more truthful by ensuring they are *coherent*. Only thusly purified can δόξα reveal how things appear to each and bring about a genuine perspective on the common world. For Arendt, however, the criterion of internal coherence is not merely an application of the principle of non-contradiction to human speech. The principle of non-contradiction is but the logical expression of a deeper psychological phenomenon that she thinks Socrates has discovered:

> The fear of contradiction comes from the fact that each of us, "being one," can at the same time talk with himself (*eme emautô*) as though he were two.…The fear of contradiction is the fear of splitting up, of no longer remaining one, and this is the reason why the axiom of contradiction could become the fundamental rule of thought (Arendt 1990, 85 – 86).

[15] On the distinction between the *unum verum* and meaning, see Arendt (1977, 1, 53 – 65).

[16] On the process of understanding as unending, see Arendt (2005, 307 – 308) and Borren (2013, 241).

This experience of the two-in-one, the anticipation of the notion of "conscience," is then the basic condition of possibility of Socrates' disclosive midwifery. In other words, the configuration of the public realm as a space of disclosure seems predicated on a truth attested in an *individual* experience: "What Socrates was driving at…is that living together with others begins with living together with oneself. Socrates' teaching meant: only he who knows how to live with himself is fit to live with others" (Arendt 1990, 86 – 87). Does that mean that the primary locus of truth in the Socratic sense is the individual soul and not the public, intersubjective realm?

II. Plurality Inside and Out: The Politics of Socratic Solitude

In "Civil Disobedience" (1970), Arendt does at one point claim that "conscience is unpolitical" (Arendt 1972, 60). But this is so only if one retreats in the privacy of one's conscience with no intent of reentering the public realm of doxastic disclosure. Yet as soon as "conscientious objectors decide to enter the market place and make their voices heard in public," conscience becomes "politically significant" (Arendt 1972, 67 – 68). This is compatible with the claim she makes in 1954: "The political relevance of Socrates' discovery is that it asserts that solitude…is …the necessary condition for the good functioning of the polis" (Arendt 1990, 89). To understand that claim, we must distinguish Socratic solitude from Platonic solitude.[17] These two attitudes involve a different stance on two distinct solitary experiences: first, the internal dialogue of conscience, and second, the experience of philosophic wonder (θαῦμα).

Socratic conscience, as a dialogue between myself and I, is thoroughly discursive. One of the Platonic passages Arendt likes to cite to discuss the two-in-one is from the *Hippias Major*. At the end of that dialogue, Socrates playfully tells Hippias that he is awaited by a "very close relative who lives in the same house" and who is "continuously cross-examining him" (*Hippias Major* 304d).[18] Arendt writes: "What Socrates discovered was that we can have intercourse with ourselves, as well as with others, and that the two kinds of intercourse are somehow interrelated" (Arendt 1977, 1, 188 – 189). They are related insofar as both are discursive intercourses so there can be a dialogical continuity between the two. Between the agora and the home, the conversation continues and discursivity endures. They also are related because both enact the human

[17] *Contra* Cassin (1990, 40), Arendt's portrait of Socrates qua thinker is *not* the "Platonizing Socrates."
[18] Thinking is also called a dialogue of the soul with itself in both the *Theaetetus* (189e4 – 190a1) and *Sophist* (263e3 – 264a3).

condition of plurality.[19] *Pace* scholars who have emphasized a difference between internal *duality* and public *plurality*,[20] Arendt is clear that the solitary experience of conscience remains a plural one:

> This is also the reason why the plurality of men can never entirely be abolished …: even if I were to live entirely by myself I would, as long as I am alive, live in the condition of plurality.…The philosopher who, trying to escape the human condition of plurality, takes his flight into absolute solitude, is more radically delivered to this plurality inherent in every human being than anybody else (Arendt 1990, 86).[21]

As such, the experience of the two-in-one prepares the individual to engage publicly with her peers, something Arendt's Plato never intends to do. The truth attested in this solitary yet plural experience has two potential political contributions. First, Socrates' insight from the *Gorgias* that it is better "to have any number of people disagreeing with me and contradicting me, than, being one, to be in disagreement and contradiction with myself" (*Gorg*. 482c; cf. Arendt 1990, 84; Arendt 1977, 1, 181) can be actualized in the soul of our fellow citizens through serious cross-examination. And instilling into others the desire to be one with oneself helps purify and clarify their distinct doxastic perspective on the common world. Second, this injunction of internal harmony is the foundation of a fundamental Socratic ethical imperative that is consequential for the life of the πόλις, namely that "doing wrong is worse than suffering it" (*Gorg*. 474b). Arendt explains it thusly:

> the reason why you should not kill, even under conditions where nobody will see you, is that you cannot possibly want to be together with a murderer. By committing murder you would deliver yourself to the company of a murderer as long as you live" (Arendt 1990, 87; cf. Arendt 1977, 1, 188).

The two-in-one of Socratic thinking therefore prepares and informs the public space of appearance both at the logical and the ethical levels. It is by no means unpolitical (cf. Backman 2021, 271 – 277).

The same is not true of philosophic wonder, at least not unqualifiedly. Wonder, Arendt grants Plato (*Theaetetus* 155d2 – 4), is the beginning and principle (ἀρχή) of philosophy. Unlike thinking, wondering (θαυμάζειν) is a non-discursive experience in the face of either genuine perplexity or of an

[19] On enactment in Arendt's phenomenology, see Loidolt (2018).

[20] E.g., Cavarero (2019, 43 – 44).

[21] Cf. Arendt (1997, 1, 187) and Vallée (1999, 24).

insight that "cannot be related in words" (Arendt 1990, 97). Wonder is an affection (πάθος) one endures in speechlessness. It thus stands opposed to opining, δοξάζειν, which Arendt thinks is the properly political form of speech. Θαυμάζειν as such is by no means the prerogative of philosophers and rather pertains to the human condition (Arendt 1990, 100), but, unlike philosophers, the multitude "refuse to endure it" and thereby resort to δοξάζειν (Arendt 1990, 99). By enduring wonder in speechlessness, the philosopher sets herself apart from the political animal, famously characterized by Aristotle as the linguistic animal (ζῷον λόγον ἔχον). Just like the discursivity of silent thinking implied the *plurality* inherent in the self, here the non-discursivity of wonder entails the philosopher's peculiar *singularity* that alienates her from the πόλις, "which can only look with suspicion on everything that concerns man in the singular" (Arendt 1990, 100). It looks like θαυμάζειν stands opposed the human condition of plurality. It would naturally be absurd for Arendt to deny that Socrates is a philosopher, and thereby to deny that he endured the experiences of wonder that befell him (cf. Arendt 1990, 98).[22] But then how can Socrates embody the compatibility of philosophy and politics rather than their antagonism? Arendt thinks Plato's approach to wonder consecrates this antagonism while Socrates' circumvents it. Plato absolutized the experience of wonder by proposing an entire way of living centered around it:

> Plato proposed to prolong indefinitely the speechless wonder which is at the beginning and end of philosophy. He tried to develop into a way of life (the *bios theôrêtikos*) what can be only a fleeting moment…In this attempt the philosopher establishes himself, bases his whole existence on that singularity which he experienced when he endured the *pathos* of *thaumadzein*. And by this he destroys the plurality of the human condition within himself (Arendt 1990, 101).

Socrates, on the contrary, remains constantly *open* to the experience of wonder without trying to make it a life-long dwelling.[23] There are at least four advantages to this Socratic position. First, Socrates' attitude is more respectful of the proper temporality of the phenomenon of wonder, while Plato distorts it by trying to extend a fleeing instant into some more or less permanent state. Second, by letting the moment of wonder naturally come to its end, Socrates

[22] Villa (1999) sees Arendt's Socrates as a citizen and *not* a philosopher.

[23] *Pace* Backman (2021, 272) who thinks θαυμάζειν is for Arendt Platonic-Aristotelian and *not* Socratic. See Vallée (1999, 63 – 64).

lets emerge in turn the naturally "ensuing dialogue of solitude," which is "an integral part of being and living together with others" (Arendt 1990, 101). Third, while the solitary thinking philosopher too "cannot help but form opinions," she "avoids the dogmatism of mere opinion holders" by remaining "always ready to endure the *pathos* of wonder" (Arendt 1990, 101). Fourth and relatedly, Socrates is able and willing to give his solitary experience of wonder a public expression. This may seem at first impossible. For on the one hand, being constantly and genuinely open to θαυμάζειν, Socrates cannot simply fall back onto δοξάζειν. On the other hand, one cannot enter the realm of the speaking animal speechlessly. But there is a non-doxastic form of speech that can translate speechless wonder into words: *questions*. Arendt thus says that "speechlessness expresses itself only in the raising of unanswerable questions" (Arendt 1990, 100). So Socratic wonder gives itself a political expression by bursting out in the open with a radical form of questioning:[24]

> as soon as the speechless state of wonder translates itself into words, it will not begin with statements but will formulate in unending variations what we call the ultimate questions – What is being? Who is man? What meaning has life? What is death? etc. (Arendt 1990, 98).

Arendt, it is true, emphasizes that this discursive expression of wonder puts the philosopher in a "decisive disadvantage" in the political realm (Arendt 1990, 100). Entering the space of appearance with radical questions but without any "distinct and clearly defined *doxa* to compete with other opinions" (Arendt 1990, 100), Socrates raises suspicions and unsettles the city, which exposes him to a high risk. And yet this unsettling of the public realm is a great advantage for the city as a whole, for it sets into motion the discursive perspectivism which grants the πόλις its truthfulness and allows the plurality of human beings that inhabit it to be enacted. In the case of Socrates, then, there is productive dialectic between private thinking and wondering on the one hand, and public inquiry on the other. Both the ethical and logical upshots of the two-in-one and the questioning implicit in silent wonder are deprivatized, transposed into the public realm which they both inform and animate.

By contrast, Platonic solitude, distrusting the public realm as such, resists such deprivatization and resolves to dwell outside the city, over and above it, as it were. The Platonic descent back into the cave, per Arendt's interpretation, is nothing like the Socratic engagement with the citizens' δόξαι, but a

[24] Cf. Tassin (2017, 75 – 76).

somewhat tyrannical attempt to rule and mold the city from without, that is, to employ transcendent Forms as measures and yardsticks of human action (Arendt 1968, 107 – 115).[25] Not recognizing any kind of truth immanent to politics as a human activity, Plato's "tyranny of reason" crushes action altogether by "substituting making for acting" (Arendt 1968, 108; Arendt 1957, 222 – 230). From this Platonic standpoint, the truthfulness of the πόλις no longer revolves around its capacity for perspectival disclosure, but rather depends on the extent to which it corresponds to the unchanging Forms contemplated by philosopher-rulers. This new top-down, productionist approach to politics is the inception of the tradition of political philosophy, a tradition of *Politikvergessenheit* for which Plato's retreat in the theoretical life is responsible. Recovering Socrates then means retrieving politics as a space where truth is preserved from its transformation into mere correspondence or correctness. Arendt agrees with Heidegger on the Platonic distortion of our understanding of truth; she disagrees with him about where its original sense should be sought for. The real site of ἀλήθεια is Socratic civic conversation, not pre-Socratic *Dichten*.

III. Conclusion: Socratic Tragedy?

Arendt's Socrates embraces an understanding of truth where the questioning activity of the philosopher and the appearing activity of the citizen go hand in hand. His inquiry catalyzes the citizen's potential for truthfulness by urging them to spell out how the world distinctively appears to them, thereby multiplying the discursive profiles through which the common world and its meaning are disclosed. This public activity both depends on and is nourished by somewhat more private and solitary experiences of thinking, the ethico-logical experience of the two-in-one, and the experience of speechless wonder. This is so because Socrates never definitively withdraws from the public realm; his solitary experiences are deprivatized and relocated into the public space of appearance that they thereby set into motion. Such is the Socratic dialectical equilibrium between solitude and publicity, politics and thinking.

But this equilibrium is as admirable as it is difficult to maintain, and the trial of Socrates, Plato's reaction to it notwithstanding, indicates a way in which it can break down. As we have seen, Arendt does recognize that the philosopher's situation in the πόλις is precarious. The maieutic process of purification whereby Socrates facilitates perspectival disclosure in the city sometimes has a much more

[25] On Arendt's interpretation of the Cave and its Heideggerian inflexions, see Abensour (2007).

corrosive effect than a mere salutary clarification and rectification: "the search for truth in the *doxa* can lead to the catastrophic result that the *doxa* is altogether destroyed, or that what had appeared is revealed as an illusion" (Arendt 1990, 90). When this happens, the philosopher puts herself at risk. But avoiding this risk would mean betraying the Socratic fate to be a gadfly of the city. Socrates seems to be caught in a somewhat tragic tension.

Arendt surely thinks that Plato exacerbated this tension by enlarging the gulf between truth and opinion against Socrates' own intentions. But she also thinks that Plato's response to this tension occluded a politically productive potential within it. For in times of crises, the possibly destructive effect of Socratic inquiry can liberate human beings for a capacity different than δοξάζειν but equally, if not even more political:

> the purging component of thinking (Socrates' midwifery, which brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them – values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions) is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgment (Arendt 1977, 1, 192)

This faculty to judge particulars and to "tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly," "the most political of man's abilities," is thus one of the possible outcomes of Socrates' dialectical confrontation with his fellow citizen's opinions (Arendt 1977, 1, 192 – 193).[26] More specifically, it is a possibility opened up when the Socratic philosopher is most at risk, when she most exposes herself to her tragic destiny within the πόλις. Even when Socrates comes into conflict with the city, his philosophical inquiry still benefits it. For the liberation of judgment "realizes thinking" and "makes it manifest in the word of appearances" (Arendt 1977, 1, 193). Even within Socrates' tragedy, there is, then, a bridge between philosophy and politics. The persistence of this bridge makes Socrates' fate far less tragic than Plato thought it was. Plato's misconstrual of Socrates' fate is what made it increasingly difficult to think the possibility of such bridge. The real tragedy is not Socratic, but Platonic. And Arendt's Socrates offers a path to overcome this Platonic tragedy.

[26] Cf. Vallée (1999, 35 – 37).

Bibliography

ABENSOUR, M. (2007): Contre la souveraineté de la philosophie sur la politique. La Lecture arendtienne du mythe de la caverne. In: Kupiec, A. – Leibovici, M. et al. (eds.): *Hannah Arendt. Crises de l'état-nation. Pensées alternatives*. Paris: Sens & Tonka, 341 – 368.

ARENDT, H. (1957): *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ARENDT, H. (1968): *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking Press.

ARENDT, H. (1972): *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt.

ARENDT, H. (1977): *The Life of the Mind*, vols. 1-2 (vol. 1: Thinking, vol. 2: Willing). New York: Harcourt.

ARENDT, H. (1990): Philosophy and Politics. *Social Research*, 57 (1), 73 – 103.

ARENDT, H. (2005): *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken.

BACKMAN, J. (2021): The (Meta)politics of Thinking: On Arendt and the Greeks. In: Larsen, K. – Gilbert, P.R. (eds.): *Phenomenological Interpretations of Ancient Philosophy*. Leiden: Brill, 260 – 282.

BORREN, M. (2013): "A Sense of the World": Hannah Arendt's Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Common Sense. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 21 (2), 225 – 255. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2012.743156

CASSIN, B. (1990): Greeks and Romans: Paradigms of the Past in Arendt and Heidegger. Trans. by J. Barnes. *Comparative Civilizations Review*, 22 (22), 28 – 53. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol22/iss22/5

CAVARERO, A. (2019): The Human Reconceived: Back to Socrates with Arendt. In: Bianchi, E. – Brill, S. – Holmes, B. (eds.): *Antiquities Beyond Humanism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 31 – 46.

GADAMER, H.-G. (2014): *Truth and Method*. Trans. by W. Glen-Doepel, rev. by J. Weinsheimer – D. G. Marshall. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

HEIDEGGER, M. (1992): *Platon: Sophistes*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.

HUSSERL, E. (2014): *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy. Book I*. Trans. by D. Dahlstrom. Indianapolis: Hackett.

LAVALLÉE, M.-J. (2018): *Lire Platon avec Hannah Arendt. Pensée, politique, totalitarisme*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

LOIDOLT, S. (2018): *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity*. New York: Routledge.

NIETZSCHE, F. (2006): *Genealogy of Morality*. Trans. by C. Diethe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

PAGEAU-ST-HILAIRE, A. (2025): *Heidegger and his Platonic Critics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (*Cambridge Elements Series on The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*).

RENAUD, F. (1999): *Die Resokratisierung Platons. Die platonische Hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamers*. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag.

TAMINIAUX, J. (1996): *Bios politikos* and *bios theoretikos* in the Phenomenology of Hannah Arendt. Trans. D. Moran. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 4 (2), 215 – 232. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559608570832

TAMINIAUX, J. (1997): *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger*. Trans. by M. Gendre. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
VALLÉE, C. (1999): *Hannah Arendt: Socrate et la Question du Totalitarisme*. Paris: Ellipses.
VASTERLING, V. (2011): Political Hermeneutics: Hannah Arendt's Contribution to Hermeneutic Philosophy. In: Wierciński, A. (ed.): *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*. Münster: LIT Verlag, 571 – 583.
VILLA, D. (1996): *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
VILLA, D. (1999): Arendt and Socrates. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 53 (2), 241 – 257.

Grant Support: Fonds de Recherche du Québec – Société et Culture.

Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire
Department of Philosophy
University of Ottawa
Desmarais Building, Room 8101
55 Laurier Ave. East
Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Canada
e-mail: apageausthilaire@gmail.com
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5543-2060