

GIUSEPPE BALLACCI

**ACTUALIZING DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP:
ARENDT AND CLASSICAL RHETORIC
ON JUDGMENT AND PERSUASION**

ESTRATTO

da

**ATHENIAN LEGACIES
EUROPEAN DEBATES
ON CITIZENSHIP**

Edited by
PASCHALIS M. KITROMILIDES



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GIUSEPPE BALLACCI

ACTUALIZING DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP:
ARENDT AND CLASSICAL RHETORIC ON JUDGMENT
AND PERSUASION

INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt, undoubtedly one of the greatest political philosophers of our times, is known for the distinctiveness and originality of her vision. Trained as a philosopher, she came to develop along the years a pointedly critical stance toward the bulk of western philosophy, which she accused of a deep and generalized lack of sensibility toward politics, an entrenched inability to understand it in its proper terms. Of course, this doesn't mean that Arendt was not influenced, and even profoundly, by important philosophers (we could mention for instance the names of Socrates, Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, Nietzsche, Jaspers, or Heidegger); but when it comes to politics, she saved but a few: namely, Socrates and Kant. In this sense, we may say that Arendt's refusal to be included among the ranks of the 'philosophers' and the 'professional thinkers' was not an exaggeration, a provocative pose, but something deeper, as it concerns her identity, her answer to what she considered the very important question: *who are you?*¹ For someone like her, who devoted a whole life to the study of what she considered probably the most ennobling among human activities, politics, should not have been a secondary question to be seen as a political theorist. However, as a member of a philosophical tradition she considered herself burdened by a long history of incomprehension towards the activity of politics. One would have a hard time, indeed, finding in the history of philosophy a pronouncement on

¹ H. ARENDT, 'What Remains? The Language Remains', in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. J. Kohn (New York, 1994), pp. 1-23. H. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, 1-vol. ed., vol. 1, 'Thinking' (New York, 1978), p. 3.

the relevance of politics, so passionate as that she made in the last pages of her book *On Revolution*. There, she recalled those “famous and frightening lines” that the chorus utters in Sophocles’ tragedy, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and then the answer that the legendary founder and spokesman of Athens, Theseus, gives, for whom only “the *polis*, the space of men’s free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendor” enables ordinary men to bear life’s burden.² Declarations of the same tenor, of course, can be found coming from politicians, as in the speech Pericles gave to his fellow-citizens, or in some excerpts of Thomas Jefferson or of other founding fathers. But if we want to find such exaltations of the *vita activa* in intellectuals, if not philosophers strictly speaking, we should turn to Roman thinkers, or to their followers in the ‘civic humanist’ tradition: to Cicero, for instance, who compared the capacity of founding and maintaining constitutions to a divine power, and who declared that all virtue consists in action; or to Quintilian, according to whom all virtues are concentrated in the perfect orator, the true citizen who establishes and maintains the cities; or to humanists such as Brunetto Latini, Coluccio Salutati, or Leonardo Bruni, who centuries later would praise the *vita activa* on similar terms.³ And indeed it is not a coincidence that when Arendt tried to epitomize the existential value of politics, she referred precisely to the fundamental Roman concept of *humanitas*, which for her expresses “the very height of humanness” that can only be reached by throwing oneself into a “venture into the public realm”.⁴ However, as I suggested, all these Roman and humanist authors have rarely been included on the lists of the serious, systematic, ‘authentic’ philosophers. Emblematic, in this sense, are the opinions expressed by Hegel and Heidegger about Roman philosophy as a mere reproduction, hollow, and even unfaithful, of Greek thought (a kind of judgment that Heidegger extended to the humanists). And this judgment was indeed partially shared by the Arendt herself, who on one occasion came to speak of a “strange lack of philosophic talent” characterizing Roman culture, or in another of Augustine as the only real philosopher it was able to produce.⁵ But Arendt, as I have just mentioned, always had a critical

² H. ARENDT, *On Revolution* (New York, 1971), p. 281. In the same text, some pages earlier, Arendt declared unequivocally that “that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power”. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

³ CICERO, *De re publica* I.7. CICERO, *De officiis* I.19. QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria* I.pr.9-10. M. VIROLI, *From Politics to Reason of State: The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics, 1250-1600* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 26-30, 71-105.

⁴ H. ARENDT, ‘Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio’, in *Men in Dark Times* (New York, 1968), pp. 73-74.

⁵ On the other hand, however, Arendt credited Cicero with some brilliant philosophic intuitions and recognized the deep influence of Roman thought on Hegel. H. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, in

relationship with philosophy. By contrast, she showed a great admiration for a people like the Romans, whom she considered “perhaps the most political people we have known”, and to which she attributed a “political genius”.⁶ In this sense, we can say that the Roman political experience was undoubtedly an important source of inspiration, even though maybe not as crucial as the Greek *polis*, in her attempt to recover a more authentic meaning of politics. And even more, if we consider the obvious relationships between Rome and two political thinkers Arendt admired greatly, Machiavelli and Montesquieu. Despite the extensive evidence of this continuous influence, we find among the vast secondary literature on Arendt almost nothing devoted to specifically this relationship.⁷ Of course, we find numerous republican readings of her work, and republicanism is a political tradition that is closely related to Rome and to civic humanism.⁸ But these works tend to underline and analyse Arendt’s clear republican traits, remaining inside the limits of her thought.

In this essay, instead, I will propose a reading of Arendt through what was a central element of Roman and then humanistic culture: rhetoric. In order to do that, nevertheless, I would need to consider also some Greek authors, because even though rhetoric attained a great prominence in Rome, it was an art imported from Greece. But why to attempt this kind of comparison? Well, first of all we have to reflect on Arendt’s critical attitude toward philosophy, which Dana Villa has described as a sort of ‘deconstructive gesture’ in order to get closer to a more authentic meaning of politics, concealed under a whole conceptual framework built through the centuries.⁹ Even from the

Between Past and Future (New York, 1961), p. 126. H. ARENDT, ‘What is Freedom?’, in *Between Past and Future*, p. 166. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 151-153; H. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, 1-vol. ed., vol. 2, ‘Willing’ (New York, 1978), p. 84. Cf. S. GIORELLI BERSANI, *L’auctoritas degli antichi. Hannah Arendt tra Grecia e Roma* (Florence, 2010), pp. 2, 128; D. HAMMER, ‘Hannah Arendt and Roman Political Thought: The Practice of Theory’, *Political Theory*, 30 (2002), pp. 124-149.

⁶ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), pp. 7, 195.

⁷ K.M. MCCLURE, ‘The Odor of Judgment: Exemplarity, Propriety, and Politics in the Company of Hannah Arendt’, in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, eds. C. J. Calhoun and J. McGowan (Minneapolis, 1997), pp. 53-84; HAMMER, ‘Hannah Arendt and Roman Political Thought’; J. TAMINIAUX, ‘Athens and Rome’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. D. Villa (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 165-177; GIORCELLI BERSANI, *L’auctoritas degli antichi*.

⁸ For instance: M. CANOVAN, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1992), ch. 6. I. HONOHAN, *Civic Republicanism* (London, 2002), ch. 4. F. VALLESPÍN, ‘Hannah Arendt y el republicanismo’, in *El siglo de Hannah Arendt*, ed. M. Cruz (Barcelona, 2006), pp. 107-138.

⁹ D. VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, 1996), p. xi. This deconstructive gesture against tradition by Arendt, even though deeply inspired by Heidegger, would not exempt him. Indeed, according to her in the philosophy of her teacher it is possible to detect the typical prejudice of philosophy against politics, which proclaims the absolute superiority of the *bios theoretikos*. The relationship between these two thinkers has been analysed extensively by Jacques Taminiaux and Dana Villa. The former, in particular, has underlined how the recovery of

conviction of the absolute impossibility to reestablish the thread of a broken tradition and without any antiquarian longing for the past, the Greek *polis* and the Roman *res publica* represent for her unique examples of communities that have come close to real essence of the political.¹⁰ Rhetoric was a central aspect of those political experiences. Originated directly from the practice of public eloquence in the first democratic experiences, first in Syracuse and then in Athens between the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., and then progressively systematized in a kind of civic education and cultural ideal, it was probably the main rival Plato's philosophy encountered in trying to fill the void left by the crumbling of the ancient educational ideal of Homeric poetry.¹¹ If philosophy was born as a contemplative experience, remote from the tumultuous realm of politics, and which came to be interested in politics only later on and almost reluctantly; rhetoric instead was a practical art engendered directly from the experience of politics and only later transformed into a theoretical discipline. Thus rhetoric and philosophy had two quite contrasting perspectives on the political; and we can say that their confrontation had a sort of mutually 'constitutive' role, in the sense that each of them tried to define its identity and to establish its legitimacy also through a mutual opposition with the other.¹²

We start then to see why a comparison between Arendt and rhetoric may be interesting. But we need to go deeper. Without running the risk of oversimplifying, we may say that Arendt's polemical attitude toward philosophy consists essentially in a critique about its incapacity to conjugate thinking and acting, philosophy and politics, theory and practice. She was, of course, well aware of the intrinsic tension existing between these two poles, to the point that we may even consider the attempt to make sense of it the key motive of her whole intellectual life.¹³ Reflecting on thinking, indeed, Arendt realized

the political by Arendt, above all in *The Human Condition*, can be read as a sort of retort and reply to Heidegger. J. TAMINIAUX, *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel: Arendt et Heidegger* (Paris, 1992), intro. and p. 77.

¹⁰ H. ARENDT, 'Preface: The Gap between Past and Future', in *Between Past and Future*, p. 14. ARENDT, 'What is Freedom?', p. 154.

¹¹ For instance: W. JAEGER, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. 2: *In Search of the Divine Centre*, trans. G. Highet (Oxford, 1944), pp. 1-11. B. VICKERS, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 83-159. G. KENNEDY, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton, 1994), ch. 1,2 and 3. A. LÓPEZ EIRE, 'La etimología de *ῥητωρ* y los orígenes de la retórica', *Faventia*, 20 (1998), pp. 61-69.

¹² E. SCHIAPPA, *The Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece* (New Haven, 1999), pp. 163-184. S. IJSSELING, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict: An Historical Survey* (The Hague, 1976), p. 5. VICKERS, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, pp. 212-213.

¹³ This is confirmed quite evidently by the fact that her two masterpieces – *The Human Condition* (originally to be titled *Vita activa*) and *The Life of the Mind* – are devoted respectively to action and to the life of the mind.

how this activity – the silent dialogue within the self-requires solitude, an estrangement from our involvement in the common world perceived by the senses. On the other hand, however she also realized that thinking, even if it deals only with general and abstract ideas, can only emerge from the particular, concrete experiences we have in the common world; which implies that, in order not to loose in empty abstractions, the thinker needs always to come back to the “redeeming grace of companionship” of the others.¹⁴ In this sense, for her the great shortcoming of philosophy was precisely to have almost transformed this tension into an irreconcilable opposition:

Our tradition of political thought began when Plato discovered that it is somehow inherent in the philosophical experience to turn away from the common world of human affairs; it ended when nothing was left of this experience but the opposition of thinking and acting, which, depriving thought of reality and action of sense, makes both meaningless.¹⁵

A judgment like this can of course appear too peremptory, to say the least, but it definitely expresses her deeply entrenched belief¹⁶, as we may grasp from a passage from *On revolution* when she referred to the opportunity to reconcile the age-old rift between thinking and acting – originated in the aftermath of the Periclean Age, as “the men of action and the men of thought parted company and thinking began to emancipate itself altogether from reality” – as the “great hope of the modern age”; a hope that went unfulfilled, however, because of “the enormous strength and resiliency of our tradition of thought”.¹⁷ In Arendt’s account, at the origins of this deep chasm between philosophy and politics there was the wrong answer Plato gave to a concrete, and deeply shocking circumstance: the execution of Socrates at the hands of a society in the process of a political breakdown.¹⁸ It is in this context, in-

¹⁴ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 74-76. ARENDT, *On Revolution*, p. 6, 14. Cf. H. ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1958), p. 476. H. ARENDT, ‘Action and the Pursuit of Happiness’, *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association* (New York, September 8-10, 1960), accessed online at *The Hannah Arendt Papers*, Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

¹⁵ H. ARENDT, ‘Tradition and the Modern Age’, in *Between Past and Future*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Cf. R. BEINER, ‘Rereading ‘Truth and Politics’, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 34 (2008), pp. 123-136, here p. 128.

¹⁷ ARENDT, *On Revolution*, p. 177. Cf. H. ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago, 1982), p. 22.

¹⁸ This is a confirmation of the enormous influence concrete experiences can bear on thought. As Arendt wrote: “In the entire tradition of philosophical, and particularly of political thought, there has perhaps been no single factor of such overwhelming importance and influence on everything that was to follow than the fact that Plato and Aristotle wrote in the fourth century, under the full impact of a politically decaying society, and under conditions where philosophy quite consciously either

deed, that according to her, Plato came to develop a definitive distrust toward the chaotic and always changing political realm and, in particular, toward persuasion – the typical way of conducting political affairs in the *polis* – as a reliable method to implement reason in there.¹⁹ It is from the urgency to protect the life of the philosopher in the *polis*, that according to Arendt Plato arrived to suggest what she called a “tyranny of reason”,²⁰ trying to transform the purely philosophic experience of the contemplation of the ideas – a solitary, silent, and perfectly motionless act – into an instrument of command in the political realm, where things are conducted through dialogue, among a plurality, in a constant flux of contingencies. In order to operate this transformation, Plato resorted to an analogy: the ideas were transformed from object of contemplation into standards for practice, in the same way the craftsman uses an ideal model to produce its objects. The force of coercion of this ideal model lies precisely in its transcendent and absolute status: the philosopher-king, as the craftsman, can apply the ideas as unquestionable standards for action, because they are transcendent and therefore untouched by the mutability of practice. But this Platonic solution was for Arendt intrinsically authoritarian and anti-political. First of all, because in reifying the dichotomy between knowing and acting, it not only creates an undemocratic division between an intellectual elite, which knows and decides, and an unwise and dull multitude that executes, but it also undermines the political faculty *par excellence* – judgment – reducing it to a question of mechanically subsuming the particular case into general laws generated in abstract. Secondly, because it brings the inevitable dose of violence intrinsic to production (*poiesis*) in the free realm of politics, supplanting dialogue and persuasion with the imposition of unquestionable principles.²¹

And here we reach the second, deeper level that justifies this parallel reading between Arendt and rhetoric. Arendt’s critique of Platonic political philosophy, questionable as it may be, is emblematic of her position toward the bulk of western philosophy. According to her, following the example of

deserted the political realm altogether or claimed to rule it like a tyrant.” H. ARENDT, ‘Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought’, *Social Research*, 6 (2002), pp. 273-319, here p. 297.

¹⁹ ARENDT, ‘What is Authority?’, p. 107. H. ARENDT, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, *Social Research*, 57 (1990), pp. 73-103, here pp. 73-74.

²⁰ ARENDT, ‘What is Authority?’, p. 108. ARENDT, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, p. 75.

²¹ ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 189-190, 195, 220-228. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, pp. 109-115. ARENDT, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought”, pp. 296-298. Dana Villa has synthesized Arendt’s assessment of western philosophy writing that: “The bottom line is that the (philosophic) constitution of the ‘political’ in the West coincides with the erection of a teleocratic concept of action, a concept that submits action to the rule of a goal-representing reason and a commanding, sovereign will.” VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p. 244.

Plato, philosophy has always showed a diffuse reluctance to deal with politics in its own terms. As she wrote:

Escape from the frailty of human affairs into the solidity of quiet and order has in fact so much to recommend it that the greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether. The hallmark of all such escapes is the concept of rule, that is, the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey.²²

For Arendt dealing with politics in its own terms meant, in the first place, to take politics as a *praxis* whose value lies in itself, rather than as an instrument to reach some higher goals. Hence for her trying to eliminate some of its essential, even if sometimes uneasy, features was to deny its very essence. Arendt's approach to politics always strived to come to terms with what she thought to be its basic conditions, *in primis* plurality and natality. If politics is understood as the free interaction among a plurality of individuals with different opinions, each of whom endowed with the capacity to start a new course of action, then contingency and difference result inevitably as two of its basic features. From here, she concluded that dialogue and persuasion – as a way to deal with this difference of opinions – and judgment – as a capacity to deal with contingency – are two pillars on which politics should rest. And it is precisely these ideas that Arendt and a particular strand of ancient rhetoric share, and that I want to explore in this essay. Indeed if we add to the names mentioned earlier those of Isocrates, who can be considered their patriarch, of Aristotle, an unavoidable point of reference, and of Vico, probably their last exponent, then we are locating a quite definite line inside western culture that always stressed the importance of the union between theory and practice, and that made of rhetoric the crucial link unifying these two poles.²³ More specifically, in the works of these authors, especially in those dedicated to rhetoric, we can find a conception similar to Arendt's, as in recognizing

²² ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 222.

²³ For instance: E. GARIN, *L'Umanesimo italiano. Filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento* (Bari, 1965). P. KRISTELLER, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, ed. M. Mooney (New York, 1979). P. KRISTELLER, "Humanism", in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds. C. B. Schmitt, Q. Skinner and E. Kessler (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 113-137. E. GRASSI, *La filosofia dell'umanesimo. Un problema epocale* (Naples, 1988). E. GRASSI, *Vico e l'Umanesimo* (Milan, 1992). E. GRASSI, *Retorica come filosofia. La tradizione umanistica* (Naples, 1999). Q. SKINNER, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996). J.G.A. POCOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 2003), pp. 49-59. N. STRUEVER, *The Language of History in the Renaissance: Rhetoric and Historical Consciousness in Florentine Humanism* (Princeton, 1970). N. STRUEVER, *Theory as Practice: Ethical Enquiry in the Renaissance* (Chicago, 1992).

politics as a *praxis* inevitably associated with contingency and difference, it individuates in the interrelated capacities to communicate and to judge two of its cornerstones. The proximity between rhetoric and Arendt has already been recognized: Zerilli has encountered a link between them in the emphasis they put on imagination as a political faculty; and, more relevant for our present analysis, Beiner and Garsten have underlined how the Arendtian account of judgment has a strong connection with rhetorical persuasion.²⁴ Both of them, however, have left this topic unexplored. The purpose of the present text, instead, is precisely to explore this connection. Without wanting to claim any direct or indirect influence of ancient rhetoric on Arendt, I will try to show how her understanding of dialogue and judgment can be improved through a close reading of the texts within this particular tradition of rhetoric. Combining these two perspectives, I will conclude, we can get a rich and original vision on what the performance of citizenship calls for.

POLITICS AS DIALOGUE AND PERSUASION

Starting from the most general aspect – what I may call the ontological and epistemological levels – the proximity between this tradition of rhetoric and Arendt is revealed by the fact that, against philosophy, in both cases the privileged link between appearance and politics (and of rhetoric itself) is not pointed out as deficiency to be overcome, but as an inescapable matter of fact. Arendt recognizes explicitly appearance as the proper dimension of politics in various occasions, and with a quite evident polemical intention against philosophy, which uses to condemn appearance as what conceals the real essence of things.²⁵ For her “in politics, more than anywhere else, we have no possibility of distinguishing between being and appearance. In the realm of human affairs, being and appearance are indeed one and the same”.²⁶ This reversal is a direct consequence of the fundamental condition of plurality reigning in the public realm, which for her implies a sort of dismantling of the univocality of the essence of things constituting reality. Differently from the

²⁴ L. ZERILLI, ‘‘We Feel Our Freedom’’: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt’, *Political Theory*, 33 (2005), pp. 158-188. R. BEINER, ‘Interpretative Essay’, in H. ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 135, 138. B. GARSTEN, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), pp. 84-85.

²⁵ This polemical scope is made quite explicit in *The Life of the Mind* where Arendt tries to offer arguments in favour of an upturn of the hierarchy between essence and appearance traditionally established by metaphysics. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 23-30.

²⁶ ARENDT, *On Revolution*, p. 98.

other manifestations of human action, the reality of politics can only emerge amidst plurality, as it is inevitably (and paradoxically) dependent on the public space it engenders. Indeed if the activity of labor, which makes possible the reproduction of the vital cycle, is anonymous, and that of work always subordinated to the final product which outlasts it, political activity depends inevitably on a public space where “everything that appears... can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity”.²⁷ Because the speeches and deeds of which politics is made of leave behind nothing tangible and durable, they can only become ‘meaningful’, and in this particular sense ‘real’, when perceived by a plurality in a public space. Political reality, therefore, is a reality that exists only *inter homines esse*, only at the level of appearance.²⁸

Also in the case of rhetoric, we see how authors such as Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, or Quintilian reclaimed without complexes appearance as the proper level of politics and rhetoric, as for them the dyad surface/essence doesn’t correspond to that falsity/truth. On the contrary, Plato’s original attack against rhetoric, on behalf of philosophy, was motivated precisely by the argument that, according to him, the former can act only superficially, working with what seems but is not, rather than with what really is. In the *Gorgias*, indeed, he compares rhetoric with cosmetics, something interested in adorning more than in the substance, sustaining that it can be no more than a simulacrum of justice and an appearance of the real science of politics.²⁹ Faced with this charge, the strategy of Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian consisted not in denying the privileged dwelling of rhetoric in the realm of appearance, but rather in recomposing the Platonic sharp separation between appearance and essence. This has been explained in the clearest way by Aristotle, who reversed Plato’s critique sustaining that the proper dimension of rhetoric (the same of politics and ethics) is the probable or the verisimilar (*eikos*), rather than the truthful; two conditions that for him share the same nature (as the

²⁷ ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 50. Cf.: ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 19-30.

²⁸ As Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*: “This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them – like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world - do not live in it. No man, moreover, can live in it all the time. To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all ‘for what appears to all, this we call Being,’ [ARISTOTLE *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1172b36] and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality.” ARENDT, *The Human Condition*. p. 199.

²⁹ PLATO, *Gorgias* 463d-465d. Cf.: PLATO, *Phaedrus* 267a. Also Aristotle defines rhetoric as a sort of masquerade of political science, or something that assumes the character of politics, but in this case without a negative connotation. ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric* 1356a27-30.

same word expresses, *veri-similar*, that is, similar to truth) and are graspable by the same faculty.³⁰ The same kind of argument can be found also in Quintilian, who wrote that what is to be expected from an orator is to expose a plausible argument, rather than the truth, because in the realm of human affairs “there are many true things that are not very credible, and false things are frequently plausible”.³¹ And centuries later, we can find it once again in Giambattista Vico’s *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, the work where he attempted to defend the merits of the ancient method of study centred on the humanistic disciplines against the attack of Cartesianism. Without questioning the benefits of the new critical method in the natural sciences, Vico sustained that the Cartesian *mathesis universalis*, with its exclusive emphasis on truth, is unfit for the sphere of human affairs – marked by contingency and freedom – and risks to undermine the capacities to grasp the verisimilar and to understand the intricacies of the human mind. Becoming acquainted with what seems to be true, beyond that with truth itself, didn’t mean for him to become an opportunist but rather to cultivate practical reason.³²

This remark by Vico on practical reason allows me to further my argument. We can say that situating political action at the level of appearance means also, and crucially, to recognize contingency as its normal state of affairs. In the case of Arendt, indeed, it is evident how in all her descriptions of human action she always strove to emphasize this feature: the uniqueness and novelty that every action bears. As a result of the basic condition of ‘natality’ – the fact that every human being is endowed with a capacity to start a completely new course of actions, to perpetually escape “even the most reified order of presence”³³ – to Arendt human action appears as a sort of “miracle... the infinite improbability which occurs regularly”.³⁴ If then we add to the condition of natality that of plurality, we can understand why ac-

³⁰ ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric* 1355a, 1357b. Cf.: PLATO, *Phaedrus* 273d. For Aristotle the typical rhetorical argument - the *enthymeme*, or rhetorical syllogism – belongs to the same class of the dialectical syllogism (*Rhetoric*, 1354a15, 1355a4-7, 1356a34-56b11, 1357a-57b). Various scholars of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* have supported the philosophical relevance of having declared the probable and the verisimilar the proper ontological realm of rhetoric. For instance: P. RICOEUR, *La métaphore vive* (Paris, 1975), pp. 16-17. D.P. GAONKAR, ‘Introduction: Contingency and Probability’, in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, eds. W. Jost and W. Olmsted (Malden, Mass., 2004), p. 5.

³¹ QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria* IV.2.34-35, cf. XII.1.2. Ed. and trans. D.A. Russell, *Institutio oratoria*, Vol. II, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 237.

³² G. VICO, ‘Di nostri temporis studiorum ratione’, in *Opere*, ed. A. Battistini (Milan, 1990), pp. 87-215, 105-113, 131-143. Cf. G. VICO, “Principi di *Scienza Nuova*”, in *Opere*, p. 44, §137, 140, p. 498.

³³ VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p. 266.

³⁴ ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 245, cf. pp. 6-7. Cf. H. ARENDT, ‘The Concept of History’, in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 61-73.

ording to her human interaction will always be unlimited in its developments and unpredictable.³⁵ But political action, both for Arendt and rhetoric means above all speech.³⁶ And so, in both cases, emphasizing the contingent nature of action brings us to recognize the political realm as a space inevitably populated by a irreducible plurality of opinions. Something that, however, is reclaimed as a vital feature of political life, rather than a flawed condition to be definitively superseded by the implementation of scientific truth.

According to Arendt, this dichotomy between truth and opinion was introduced in philosophy by Plato, as an effect of his deep scepticism about the world of the *polis*. In her essay “Philosophy and Politics”, she explains that the notion of *doxa*, commonly translated as opinion, originally meant for Socrates and his fellow citizens the articulation through discourse of the world as it appears to each of us, from his or her own particular perspective (*doxai* derives from *dokei moi*, appears to me). Everyone who enters in the public realm has inevitably a particular stance on it, a particular opinion on the events that appear in there.³⁷ In opposing opinions to truth, she says, Plato drew the most anti-Socratic conclusion he could have drawn: because what Socrates wanted was not to definitely transcend opinions and install a dictatorship of truth, but rather to help his fellow citizens to find the truth present in their opinions in order to make the city more truthful. For Socrates a plurality of opinions was something normal: it is this plurality of *logoi* that constitutes the human world, insofar as the humans live together in the manner of speech.³⁸ In agreement with Socrates, Arendt considered opinions an essential characteristic of a public sphere marked by the condition of plurality. It is in the very nature of public affairs not to have the same evidence of rational truths, because they regard a common world – the *inter – est*, what is in-between - that is perceived and judged according to a plurality of perspectives. It is for this reason that political affairs always call for a debate between different opinions; because differently from rational ‘truths’ that can be reached by the individual alone through logical thinking, political ‘truths’ are disputable and therefore invite thinking to exit the self and confront with others. In this sense, if the plurality of points of view has for Arendt a sort of ontological role for the political phenomena – since “only where things can be seen by many and in a variety of aspects without changing their identity

³⁵ ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 175, 190-192.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-27, 175-181.

³⁷ ARENDT, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, p. 80.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 81.

[...] can worldly reality truly and reliably appear”³⁹ – then it is only by way of dialogue and persuasion that it is possible to recompose this plurality and move from strictly personal opinions to shared, and however always relative, ‘truths’. As she wrote:

No opinion is self-evident. In matters of opinion, but not in matters of truth, our thinking is truly discursive, running, as it were, from place to place, from one part of the world to another, through all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from these particularities to some impartial generality.⁴⁰

The validity of opinions “depends on free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking; and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion”.⁴¹ But for Arendt this “unending discourse among men” (as G. E. Lessing, the other great figure together with Socrates and Kant that inspired her in this respect, called it) was not only intrinsic to the nature of politics, but it was also something very positive as strictly related to freedom.⁴² Because “opinions”, as she wrote, “will rise wherever men communicate freely with one another and have the right to make their views public”.⁴³ At this point, the connection with ancient rhetoric is made explicit. Arendt recalls how for the Greeks the creation of the *polis* as a space where violence was banned in favour of dialogue was something to be immensely proud of; it was the institution marking the difference between them and the barbarians. This is why they considered persuasion the “specifically form of speech” and rhetoric “the truly political art”.⁴⁴

If opinions have a strong connection with freedom through dialogue, truth, on the other hand, is for her something potentially very despotic. Persuasion, indeed, is not only different from physical coercion, but, as the Greek philosophers knew very well, also from another and subtler form of coercion: that exerted by truth.⁴⁵ Philosophic truth, at least according to Plato or Aristotle, is something beyond speech and demonstration; a self-evident object of contemplation, which compels rather than convincing (at least those able to see

³⁹ ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 57. Cf. VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger*, pp. 84-94.

⁴⁰ H. ARENDT, ‘Truth and Politics’, in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. P. Baehr (New York, 2000), p. 557.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 560-561.

⁴² H. ARENDT, ‘On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing’, in *Men in Dark Times*, p. 27.

⁴³ ARENDT, *On Revolution*, p. 227.

⁴⁴ ARENDT, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, pp. 73-74. Cf.: ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 25-26. ARENDT, *On Revolution*, pp. 86, 91. H. ARENDT, ‘Introduction into Politics’, in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. J. Kohn (New York, 2005), pp. 134-135.

⁴⁵ H. ARENDT, ‘The Crisis in Culture’, in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 222-223.

it). It is the speechless result with which philosophical argumentation carried out through dialectic culminates. In this respect, Arendt reminded her readers that Plato established a rigid dichotomy between dialectic, the philosophic way of arguing between the few based on rationality and whose ultimate aim is truth, and rhetoric, the political way of speaking with the multitude, based on opinions and aiming at persuasion. She also added that this division was considered by Aristotle a matter of course; which is not completely correct, because Aristotle considered dialectic and rhetoric to be one the counterpart of the other and not the opposite. However, what it is true is that in the philosophic tradition at large, the dialectical-philosophical discourse has been generally opposed to the rhetorical-political one, which is associated to manipulation and lack of critical insight. In Arendt's account, this polarity originates in the fact that for Plato the multitude is inevitably incapable to proceed along the strictly rational way of dialectic, and even more to contemplate the ultimate truths and to endure the wonder at the mystery of being (which is the stimulus that gives rise to philosophy). Therefore for him, it is doomed to have beliefs about issues that, for a philosopher, can only be the object of an ongoing process of questioning. For this reason the only way to address the multitude is through rhetoric that, differently from dialectic, does not convince through the compelling evidence of rationality but rather resorting to extra-rational ways of persuasion.⁴⁶ However, this philosophical opposition between rhetoric and opinions, on the one hand, and dialectic and truth, on the other, according to Arendt has a quite different meaning taken from a political point of view. Because, politically speaking, truth introduces in the public sphere an element of coercion that goes against that openness to dialogue, which is a necessary condition of politics. So, she comes to affirm that "it may be in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms", because:⁴⁷

the modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if seen from a political perspective, are necessarily domineering; they don't take into account other people's opinions, and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking.⁴⁸

When someone affirms a truth, he or she doesn't want to start a dialogue, but to conclude it. The validity reclaimed by truth is undisputable, it doesn't admit replies; on the contrary it belongs to the very essence of the different

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 222-223. ARENDT, 'Philosophy and Politics', pp. 79-80, 95-103. ARENDT, 'Truth and Politics', pp. 549-550.

⁴⁷ ARENDT, 'Truth and Politics', p. 554.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 556.

'truths' affirmed in the public sphere to be relative, dependent on one's own position in the world, on one's own relationship with the other members of the public sphere. The urge to substitute truth for opinion, for Arendt, risks to block precisely the process that leads to the formation of the only 'truth' admissible in the realm of human affairs – relative 'truths' – leaving therefore the individual devoid of any kind of beliefs. This is why she accused Plato of having distorted the great lesson Socrates left us: that opinions should be made more truthful, not eliminated once for all.

Only through knowing what appears to me – only to me, and therefore remaining forever related to my own existence – can I ever understand truth. Absolute truth, which would be the same for all men and therefore unrelated, independent of each man's existence, cannot exist for mortals. For mortals the important thing is to make doxa truthful, to see in every doxa truth and to speak in such a way that the truth of one's own opinion reveals itself to oneself and to others.⁴⁹

It is evident that Arendt and the rhetorical-humanistic tradition, as we shall see presently, share a very deep point of contact about the fundamental question of the political value of truth. And this, actually, didn't escape Arendt herself. In her "Crisis in Culture", crucially one of the texts where she dealt explicitly with the question of judgment, commenting on this topic she cites a passage from Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes* (I.39-40), when he wrote: 'errare, mehercule malo cum Platone... quam cum istis (sc. Pythagoraeis) vera sentire'; a passage for which she gives the following translation: "I

⁴⁹ ARENDT, 'Philosophy and Politics', pp. 84-85. However, this position about the political value of truth doesn't bring Arendt to take a sort of sophistic or relativist stance. On the contrary, in a very suggestive passage in "Truth and Politics" she compares truth to "the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us". ARENDT 'Truth and Politics', p. 574. That is, truth delimits the borders that contain the political realm and that have to be respected in order to preserve it. Moreover, in this same essay Arendt also introduces an important distinction between 'factual' and 'rational' or 'philosophical' truth. Differently from the latter, the former is for her "political by nature" as it "always related to other people; it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that is spoken about." That is, factual truths are for her compatible with a plurality of opinions and dialogue and, indeed, she says: "factual truth informs political thought just as truth informs philosophical speculations." The tenacity with which despotic and totalitarian regimes have always attempted to distort factual truths, in this sense, is but a proof of their undeniable importance for politics. However, considering the obvious difficulty to distinguish between facts and interpretations, Arendt in the end concludes that it may be "in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its form" and that "a commitment even to factual truth" may represent "an anti-political attitude." *Ibid.*, pp. 553-554, 568-569. The importance of 'factual truth' as a condition for politics emerges also from Arendt's analysis of the Nazi propaganda. ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 341-364.

For a compelling critique of the Arendtian opposition between politics and truth, see: BEINER, 'Rereading 'Truths and Politics''.

prefer before heaven to go astray with Plato rather than hold true views with his opponents".⁵⁰ Her comments on this sentence, which she defines "a very bold, even an outrageously bold statement, especially because it concerns truth", explains in the best possible way what this proximity between Arendt and this tradition is all about:

What Cicero in fact says is that for the true humanist neither the verities of the scientist nor the truth of the philosopher nor the beauty of the artist can be absolutes; the humanist, because he is not a specialist, exerts a faculty of judgment and taste which is beyond the coercion which each specialty imposes upon us. This Roman *humanitas* applied to men who were free in every respect, for whom the question of freedom, of not being coerced, was the decisive one even in philosophy, even in science, even in the arts.⁵¹

So we can say that on this very important question Arendt preferred to take sides with Cicero, the rhetor and the humanist, rather than with Plato, the philosopher. However, in order to understand better the sense of her position it is necessary to introduce another element: a distinction she made and whose value in her thought, as Dana Villa has correctly pointed out, is difficult to overestimate.⁵² I am talking about the difference between truth and meaning, to which corresponds that between the intellect and knowing (*Verstand*), on the one hand, and reason and thinking (*Vernunft*), on the other. Arendt took this fundamental distinction mainly from Kant. The faculty of knowing belongs to the intellect and is the one that pursues truth, asking about the 'evidence' of what our senses perceive, or about the logical conclusions our rationality produces. And once it has reached that 'evidence', a 'truth', its activity stops. The faculty of thinking, instead, belongs to reason and is what brings the individual to keep questioning about the meaning of the world without being ever able to give final conclusions; it is what poses those 'unanswerable questions' that is in the very essence of human being to pose.⁵³ This distinction, which recalls the traditional distinction between the science of the human affairs and that of the natural world, is fundamental because through it Arendt can sustain her idea of politics as a very substantial activity, even if not subjected to absolute truths. In her interpretation, indeed,

⁵⁰ ARENDT, 'The Crisis in Culture', p. 224.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

⁵² VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p. 50.

⁵³ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 15, 57-62. H. ARENDT, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. Kohn (New York, 2003), p. 163. ARENDT, 'Understanding and Politics', in *Essays in Understanding*, p. 317. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 171-172.

politics results in one of those fundamental activities (along with philosophy and art) through which human beings try to give sense to the world. And its peculiarity (and its strength) consists in the fact that in politics this search for meaning becomes in the most evident sense a collective effort, becomes public.⁵⁴

This Arendtian view on the difference between truth and meaning, the importance of opinions and beliefs, is in perfect agreement with our tradition of rhetoric. As we have seen before, rhetoric has been traditionally associated with appearance and philosophy with essence, which translated in epistemological terms means that the first is the one dealing with opinions and verisimilitude, while the latter with truth and knowledge. This is the traditional position held by philosophers starting from Plato and then, in the following centuries, by many others such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, or today Rawls and Habermas, and the main reason they had for distrusting rhetoric. But, as I have just mentioned, in the rhetorical tradition I am referring to, this opposition between knowledge and opinion, essence and appearance, is questioned, and contingency, plurality, difference, understood as intrinsic political features that cannot be denied. When Aristotle responded to Plato declaring that the verisimilar (*eikos*) is the proper standard for rhetoric, he was reclaiming for this art its proper space, the non-specialist space of everyday living made of beliefs and opinions, but without marking an irreducible separation between it and that of philosophy and science. Rhetoric is the kind of communicative skill proper of this realm: the realm of human affairs. It is what Pierre Aubenque called the ‘ontological space of contingency and indetermination’, where deliberation and signification are required as ultimate truths are not available;⁵⁵ it is the space where:

man is faced not with absolutes but rather with facts, problems, situations, questions, which admit of probable knowledge and probable truth and call for deliberation before assent. It is the area in which the intelligent and prudential course of action which is most conformable to the concrete reality and truth is determined in a given instance by the specific circumstances which appear most valid.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ For Arendt indeed opinions such as “all men are created equal”, even without the coercive power of philosophical or religious truths – they are neither self-evident nor provable – are “politically of the greatest importance.” Differently from this kind of truths, their significance derives precisely from the fact of being formed through the experience of participation in the realm of human affairs. They are indeed precisely what gives the “human quality” to this intercourse and what influences more its quality. ARENDT, ‘Truth and Politics’, p. 561.

⁵⁵ P. AUBENQUE, *La Prudence chez Aristote* (Paris, 1963), p. 44.

⁵⁶ W. GRIMALDI, ‘Rhetoric and the Philosophy of Aristotle’, *The Classical Journal*, 53 (1958), pp. 371-375, here p. 372.

And this is why rhetoric, as this kind of generic communicative skill, can be considered a crucial manifestation of practical reason.⁵⁷ A similar kind of understanding of rhetoric can be found also in Isocrates, Cicero, Quintilian, and many humanists. For all of them, indeed, between truth and opinions, and between the philosophers and the multitude, there was not an intrinsic opposition; and likewise, all of them rejected Plato's deep scepticism manifested in relation to the possibility of persuading the multitude through reasonable arguments. In Isocrates, rhetoric and philosophy came almost to coincide in an ideal of wisdom based on the art of *logos*, whose ultimate goal was to promote the common good, and whose foundation was not absolute knowledge (*episteme*, which is for him beyond human capacities), but the most authoritative opinions (*doxai*).⁵⁸ For Cicero and Quintilian rhetoric became the supreme civic art that, through the wise use of language, generalizes and transforms wisdom into political action. It was, in a certain sense, what connects the sphere of knowledge and wisdom, cultivated by philosophy and the other theoretical disciplines, with the common world populated by opinions and where action takes place.⁵⁹ As we have seen earlier with Vico, for an orator who needs to communicate with the multitudes, to know how to choose arguments not too much removed from common sense or too difficult was a sign of practical reason. The character Crassus in Cicero's *De oratore*, indeed, defines *ineptitudo*, precisely the incapacity to adapt the discourse to the circumstances; a deficiency, he says, whose gravest manifestations he found among the Greeks (a very philosophical people), with their habit of "plunging into in any place and any company they like, of plunging into the most subtle dialectic concerning subjects that present extreme difficulty".⁶⁰

⁵⁷ ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric* 1355b, 1357a, 1358a, 1359b, 1419a. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112a and ff., 1139a and ff.

⁵⁸ ISOCRATES, *Antidosis* 253-258, 270-271. Against the reduction of *doxa* as 'mere opinion' made by Plato, Isocrates recovered the ancient meaning of *doxa* as 'fame': the reputation gained by an individual for the deeds accomplished during his or her life. T. POULAKOS, 'Isocrates' Civic Education and the Question of Doxa', in *Isocrates and Civic Education*, ed T. Poulakos and D. J. Depew (Austin, 2004), pp. 44-66. In Cicero and Quintilian, the notion of opinion can be considered as standing in the middle between Plato's position and that of the sophists: that is, for them an opinion is neither something inevitably concealing truth, nor something always identical with truth (that is, the only kind of truth really available), but rather the base from which to get closer to truth. GARSTEN, *Saving Persuasion*, pp. 144-146, 151-155. J.D. O'BANION, 'Narration and Argumentation: Quintilian on *Narratio* as the Hearth of Rhetorical Thinking', *Rhetorica*, 5 (1987), pp. 325-351, here pp. 345-347.

⁵⁹ For instance: CICERO, *De inventione* I.II.2. CICERO, *De oratore* III.61. QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria* I.pr.13-15, II.16.14-15, XII.2.1-17, etc.

⁶⁰ CICERO, *De oratore* II.18, cf. I.12, 94, II.159, III.338. Translation E. W. Sutton, *De oratore*, Vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., 1942), p. 211.

In all these authors, moreover, we can perceive a clear link between the plurality of opinions, persuasion and freedom. This results not only from the obvious fact that the art of persuasion can thrive only under the condition that the political affairs should be conducted through dialogue and consent rather than violence;⁶¹ but also because the persuasion promoted by them was of a kind that was considered authentic only if the argument proposed by the speaker could find the assent of the listeners, through the active participation of their judgment.⁶² In this sense, the traditional rhetorical exercise to learn to argue *in utramque partem* (on both sides), more than an opportunistic strategy to win the argument in all circumstances, has to be understood (at least in these authors) as originating in the conviction that it could happen that “two wise men may sometimes be drawn by just causes to opposite sides”;⁶³ i.e., that on political and ethical affairs there could be good reasons on both, and even on many sides. In accordance with this respect for plurality, finally, we have to remember that for ancient rhetoric a fundamental moment in the composition of a discourse was the *ars topica*: the art of passing through all the *loci* of a determinate topic – the most authoritative and relevant arguments about that subject – matter – in order to find there good ideas from which to construct an argument.⁶⁴ To sum up, because of the

⁶¹ In the introduction of his *Brutus*, where Cicero tells the history of eloquence in Greece and Rome, he writes bitter words on the decline of this art in his period, marked by the turbulences and violence unleashed by Caesar’s dictatorship: “For were Hoertensius alive today he would doubtless have occasion, along with other good and loyal men, to mourn the loss of many things; but one pang he would feel beyond the rest, or with few to share it: the spectacle of the Roman forum, the scene and stage of his talents, robbed and bereft of that finished eloquence worthy of the ears of Rome or even of Greece. For me too it is a source of deep pain that the state feels no need of those weapons of counsel, of insight, and of authority, which I learned to handle and to rely upon, - weapons which are the peculiar and proper resource of a leader in the commonwealth and of a civilized and law-abiding state. Indeed if there ever was a time in the history of the state when the authority and eloquence of a good citizen might have wrested arms from the hands of angry partisans, it was exactly then when through blindness or fear the door was abruptly closed upon the cause of peace” CICERO, *Brutus* 6-7, cf. 45. Translation - L. Hendrickson and H. M. Hubbell, *Brutus, Orator*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1934), pp. 21-23. Cf. TACITUS, *Dialogue on oratory* 36-40. Garsten has remarked that the defence of rhetoric made by Cicero was accompanied by the concomitant defence of the republican institutions and virtues, which constitutes its indispensable pre-conditions. GARSTEN, *Saving Persuasion*, pp. 166-169.

⁶² GARSTEN, *Saving Persuasion*, pp. 3, 7, 36, 175. J. ROIZ, *La recuperación del buen juicio* (Madrid, 2003), p. 37.

⁶³ However for Quintilian this possibility is unlikely because for him “where the Cause is unjust, there is no rhetoric, so that it can hardly happen, even in quite exceptional circumstances, that an orator, that is to say a good man, should speak on both sides.” QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria* II.17.32. Ed. and trans. Russell, *Institutio oratoria*, Vol. 1, pp. 391.

⁶⁴ For instance: CICERO, *De inventione*: I.7. CICERO *Topica*: 6 and ff. QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria*: III.3.5-7. VICO, ‘Autobiografia’, in *Opere*, pp. 17-18. VICO, ‘Dell’antichissima sapienza italiana’, in *Opere*, ed. F. Nicolini (Milan and Naples, 1953), pp. 294, 303. VICO, ‘Principi di Scienza Nuova (1744)’, § 498, p. 639.

prevalence of the verisimilar in the public sphere, for rhetoric the acquisition of knowledge was a collective and dialogical effort. And indeed it is significant that for Arendt the best institutional form to pass from a plurality of scattered opinions to this sort of shared, collective agreement, was precisely the Senate of the United States as conceived by the Founding Fathers; that is, an institution deeply inspired by the example of the Roman Republic, probably the epoch where the art of rhetoric reached its climax:

Even though opinions are formed by individuals and must remain, as it were, their property, no single individual – neither the wise man of the philosophers nor the divinely informed reason, common to all men, of the Enlightenment – can ever be equal to the task of sifting opinions, of passing them through the sieve of an intelligence which will separate the arbitrary and the merely idiosyncratic, and thus purify them into public views. For ‘the reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated. Since opinions are formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion, their differences can be mediated only by passing them through the medium of a body of men, chosen for the purpose; these men, taken by themselves, are not wise, and yet their common purpose is wisdom – wisdom under the conditions of the fallibility and frailty of the human mind.’⁶⁵

So, at this very general level, we can see that the Arendtian account of politics resembles quite precisely the description that we get from this rhetorical-humanistic tradition. In both cases, politics is approached not from the point of view of higher standards, but rather almost from its interior, so to say. Dana Villa, for instance, has spoken about a ‘phenomenological’ and ‘poetic’ approach to political action and meaning by Arendt, explaining it as being “guided by a desire to recover not concepts, but a certain way of being-in-the-world” and to protect its existential value by the constant threat of “the philosophical/human-all-too-human desire to escape its contingency and groundlessness and find a more stable alternative”.⁶⁶ This could be undoubtedly extended also to the tradition of rhetoric we are considering here. In rhetoric, as in the case of Arendt, the characteristics of the political that emerge more neatly are contingency and difference. In both cases, politics indeed results to be a kind of communicative inter-action among a plurality about some of the most important things of the community, which is conducted through appeals not to clear, absolute, and indisputable truths, but rather to a multiplicity of meanings, that is to, relative and contingent – even

⁶⁵ ARENDT, *On Revolution*, p. 227.

⁶⁶ VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p. 11.

thought sometimes very embedded – opinions. The crucial conclusion from this common recognition that Arendt and rhetoric draw is the recognition of persuasion and judgment as two crucial elements of this activity.⁶⁷ They are, indeed, the only possible ways we have to deal with contingency without resorting to authoritarian solutions: judgment, as that crucial political faculty that allows linking the general with the particular, without relying on a set of clear-cut, universal laws; persuasion, as the only legitimate kind of discourse in the political realm, which rejects both physical violence and the coercion exerted by necessary truths. Now, after having analysed the meaning of persuasion, I would like to focus on judgment.

POLITICS AS JUDGING

The fact of contingency and the necessity of dialogue and persuasion highlight two fundamental dimensions of judgment that appear both in Arendt and in rhetoric. The first is related with the question of how to manage contingency, or how to act rightly in every circumstance, that is, with practical reason. The second, instead, has to do with the creation and interpretation of those meanings (instead of truths), which are the proper object of dialogue and persuasion in the public realm. Let's start with Arendt. The question of judgment has attracted an increasing attention among scholars of her work in the last few years. This is not surprising because judgment is something that dwells at the crossroad between two of the questions that interested her most: thinking and acting. Actually, as I have said before, what Arendt has been concerned most with during her life is the relationship between thinking and acting, and in this sense judgment – the power or faculty for thinking the particular as contained under the general – can be considered the link between these two, as a kind of thinking on and in action. It is well known that Arendt's life-long interest in this topic was motivated mainly by the event of totalitarianism, and particularly by the trial to Eichmann. The deep crisis of modernity in which this event occurred had, according to her, two dimensions: it was a cultural crisis, because in Tocqueville's words "the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future and the mind of man wanders in obscurity"; and it was a political crisis, as the totalitarian regime brought to

⁶⁷ Cf. G. KATEB, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 8-14. S. BEN-HABIB, 'Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought', *Political Theory*, 16 (1988), pp. 29-51, here pp. 32-33. VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p. 35. J. TAMINIAUX, *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*, pp. 105-114.

a complete destruction any chance of acting and judging politically and with it that of taking responsibility for the common world.⁶⁸ This explains why Arendt's reflections on this topic developed on two levels: one on the history of the ideas, and the other, on the phenomenon of political action as such.

If the case of Eichmann was emblematic in revealing what dire consequences could have a failure in judging, it also revealed the prolonged silence of western philosophy on this capacity, which she considered not only the most distinctive and mysterious human capacity, but also the most political one.⁶⁹ These two aspects are, of course, connected because judgment is the link between thinking and acting, or what realizes thinking, because it is the faculty that makes thought – which deals only with invisible things and general ideas – appear into the external world made of concrete and particular things and populated by plurality.⁷⁰ So, in the light of the chasm political philosophy has created among these two poles, it is not very strange that a faculty like judgment, which dwells in-between them, didn't receive much attention. Judgment, indeed, is the faculty through which we endow action with meaning defining it in terms of goodness and badness, beauty and ugliness, rather than of truth and falsehood. It has therefore to rely on some kind of general ideas, but not in the same way as logic does subsuming the particular under well-defined universal laws. This is exactly what makes judgment puzzling, elusive, and averse to any kind of straight conceptualization: the fact it can evaluate particular things, relying on some sort of rules that however cannot be straightforwardly universalized.⁷¹ This generic description of the Arendtian account of judgment already reveals those two facets mentioned earlier. In her writings she underscores both components, making reference, on the one hand, to a more practical aspect of judgment connected to the perspective of the acting individual, to the Aristotelian *phronesis*, and, and on the other, to a more contemplative aspect of judging, that from the perspective of the spectator, which consists in ascribing meaning to action, and for which her inspiration came mostly from Kant's aesthetic theory. This

⁶⁸ ARENDT, 'Preface: The Gap between Past and Future', p. 7. Cf. ARENDT, 'Tradition and the Modern Age', p. 26. ARENDT, 'Understanding and Politics', p. 308.

⁶⁹ ARENDT, 'The Crisis in Culture', p. 221. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, p. 215. ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 4. ARENDT, 'Philosophy and Politics', p. 84. ARENDT, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', p. 188. BEINER, 'Interpretative Essay', p. 139. B. GARSTEN, 'The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment', *Social Research*, 74 (2007), pp. 1071-1108, here p. 1080.

⁷⁰ ARENDT, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', p. 189.

⁷¹ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 192-193, 213, 215. M. PASSERIN D'ENTRÈVES, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London, 2004), p. 102. GARSTEN, 'The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment'.

twofold dimension of judgment has been underlined by many of her scholars, talking with different accents of an unresolved tension, or of a productive dichotomy.⁷² Be that as it may, according to the reading I am proposing in this essay, these two dimensions are better understood as complementary components of judgment, being a manifestation of the necessary relationship between thinking and acting, theory and practice.

The case of Eichmann was to be understood according to Arendt essentially as that of an individual completely unable to think and judge for himself. What she found more shocking about him was his apparent normality, the fact that according to the standards of his society he could be considered a respected and law abiding citizen; a normality that however didn't prevent him to participate in tremendous crimes. Eichmann came even to sustain during his trial that he had spent his life according to the Kantian conception of duty.⁷³ Here the connection between the theoretical and the practical emerges clearly. Arendt sustained that Eichmann was applying a distorted version of the categorical imperative that, nevertheless, maintains something essential of the spirit of that principle: not only the obedience to the law, but the complete coincidence with the will that stands behind the law, in Kant, practical reason, and in Eichmann's mind, the will of the Fürher.⁷⁴ This was for Arendt a problem of being unable to think and judge autonomously. Thinking can be in some cases paralyzing, as it questions the same bases on which we act. But on the other hand, thinking also covers a crucial role in action, as its questioning capacity puts in suspension the unquestioned conventions handed down by tradition and therefore opens once again the possibility to judge anew. Thinking moreover, through the internal dialogue with oneself, creates as a by-product conscience as the necessary internal coherence that is, for her, the necessary condition for acting rightfully.⁷⁵ Here we see clearly how the question of theory and practice emerges. Because according to Arendt the great problems of those philosophies, or of the systems of moral values, that separate the theoretical from the practical through a separation between the conception of general principles and their application end up making irrelevant the necessity to think and judge autonomously, as they reduce politics

⁷² See for instance: BEINER, 'Interpretative Essay'. R.J. BERNSTEIN, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia, 1986), ch. 6. BENHABIB, "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought". CANOVAN, *Hannah Arendt*, ch. 3.

⁷³ H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1994), p. 135. ARENDT, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', pp. 159-160.

⁷⁴ ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 136-137.

⁷⁵ ARENDT, 'The Crisis in Culture', pp. 220-221. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 170-178. ARENDT, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', pp. 188-189.

to a mechanical application of universal laws.⁷⁶ For Arendt, the great conundrum posed by judgment lies here: in the fact that it has to be understood as a capacity operating according to some general rules, but that does not get enslaved to the grounds on which it rests, because otherwise this would excuse the individual responsibility to think and judge autonomously.⁷⁷

This is of course a problem that concerns directly practical reason. All the history of practical thinking, indeed, is concerned with the question of how to act rightly without mechanically applying universal laws. Ancient rhetoric, as a part of this tradition, was very much concerned with it, as we will see later. But Arendt, although being one among those contemporary thinkers responsible for the recovery of practical thinking, tried to make sense of judgment looking more to Kant's aesthetics theory rather than to Aristotle and the tradition of prudential thinking. Why is it so? The fact is that in Kant's *Third Critique* Arendt found not only one of the few philosophic treatments of judgment as an independent faculty, but above all an understanding of it in harmony with her general conception of politics. First of all, because for Kant aesthetic judgment is a faculty that operates at the level of appearance, of perceptions, even if it implies a certain level of conceptualization. Moreover, and more crucially for Arendt, because it is a faculty that can be fully developed only in the midst of plurality. Arendt believed to have found in Kant's *Third Critique* an understanding of judgment that ascribed to justice its quintessentially political nature, based on the fact of being "one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass".⁷⁸ Differently from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, indeed, the emphasis in the *Third Critique* was not on how to engender general laws as universal principles for action, but rather on how to learn to deal with the particular and contingency, without denying the fact of plurality and to excuse the capacity to think and judge autonomously. This is why she believed to have found in this latter work Kant's authentic, even if unwritten, political philosophy.⁷⁹

In order to understand Arendt's reading of the Kantian conception of judgment, the case of Eichmann will offer, once again, important clues. As I have mentioned, in Arendt's view what this individual showed in his actions was a failure in thinking and in judging. This meant that in Eichmann that internal dialogue that produces conscience didn't work properly. But Arendt

⁷⁶ ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, pp. 185, 225.

⁷⁷ GARSTEN, 'The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment', p. 1074.

⁷⁸ ARENDT, 'The Crisis in Culture', p. 221.

⁷⁹ ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 19.

specified that this individual showed also a great indifference for the positions of others, an incapacity to take into consideration their points of view, to which corresponded (something very important from a rhetorical point of view) an incapacity to express himself.⁸⁰ And here we reach the most political part of judgment, so to say. Because for judging properly, the internal coherence, which is the pillar on which ethics rests, is not enough; what is needed, at the same time, is to consider “the presence of others ‘in whose place’ it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all”.⁸¹ In order to understand how to realize this crucially political passage from the internal solitude of thinking to the external company of judgment, from the theoretical and abstract to the concrete and practical, Arendt found many important suggestions in Kant’s *Third Critique*. It was there that she discovered the resources to think about judgment politically, to explain the essence of its political meaning as the process of transforming a completely subjective stance in something general, public, relying only on that kind of incomplete and undefined generalities that are possible in the public realm.

A significant part of Kant’s investigation about taste can be explained as a reaction to the maxim *de gustibus non disputandum est*. Taste (like smell) is a completely subjective, private sense. But if we consider the aesthetic meaning of taste – a judgment about beauty – then we can see its public nature: because ‘beauty’ is a category that for Kant is meaningful only in society, as it is demonstrated by the fact that this kind of judgments always strives for a general acceptance.⁸² So, as Arendt wrote, “the chief problem of the *Critique of Judgment* [...] became the question of how propositions of judgment could possibly claim, as they indeed do, general agreement”.⁸³ In the *Third Critique*, the main problem for Kant was precisely to explain how something that is experienced as a subjective feeling of pleasure can, at the same time, reclaim a universal acceptance. Here for Arendt lies the gist of the political meaning of aesthetics judgment, and I may add, also its rhetorical nature. Because in aesthetic judgments, this passage is not based on determinate and well-defined concepts (as in the case of theoretical or practical judgments), which can be easily universalized, but on a sort of generality that lacks this

⁸⁰ ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 47-49.

⁸¹ ARENDT, ‘The Crisis in Culture’, p. 220-221. PASSERIN D’ENTRÈVES, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, pp. 112-113.

⁸² KANT, *Critique of Judgment* § 41.

⁸³ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, p. 111.

kind of completeness;⁸⁴ which translated in rhetorical terms, means that this passage cannot be based on indisputable truths, but only on good arguments. Here also comes the effort of communication that judgment for Kant and Arendt necessarily requires.

Exactly as it happens with political opinions, for Kant judgment “finds itself always and primarily... in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement”.⁸⁵ It is an effort of communicability that, lacking the basis of determinate and definite concepts, resorts to what we share in the common world of appearance: first, on common sense, in its literal meaning of a sense common to everyone; and second, on the capacity of imagination to ‘enlarge our mentality’, to detach from ourselves in order to assume a disinterested standpoint, and make room in our thinking for the representations of the perspectives of the others.⁸⁶ Moreover and crucially, it is an effort of communicability that rests on the conviction that the capacity to judge is diffuse among the people. Indeed for Kant to have an aesthetic judgment (and for Arendt a political opinion) is not necessary technical expertise. On the contrary, this is a capacity that is in some measure present in everyone because it is natural to the human being. It is very interesting to see that, to support this point, Arendt referred precisely to a passage of a classic text of rhetoric - Cicero’s *De oratore* - where he noted “how little difference there is between the learned and the ignorant in judging” and that when someone is less equipped with this capacity, it is very important to rely on common sense.⁸⁷

Here, indeed, we find the link between aesthetic and rhetoric.⁸⁸ As Arendt punctually notes, following the tradition of critical thinking started by Socrates, Kant considered the question of the public use of reason and its communicability a fundamental one, because for him “it is a natural vocation of mankind to communicate and speak one’s mind, especially in all matters concerning man as such”.⁸⁹ So, even if he certainly accepted that thinking needs solitude, at the same time, for him was fundamental to give a public justification, to “give an account... to be able to say how one came to an

⁸⁴ This recalls, of course, the difference between reflective and determinate judgments. KANT, *The Critique of Judgment*: § IV, cf. 44, 57.

⁸⁵ ARENDT, ‘The Crisis in Culture’, p. 221.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222. ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 42-44, 63-68. ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 475-476.

⁸⁷ Cicero cited in ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 63.

⁸⁸ Also Zerilli develops her parallelism between Arendt, aesthetic, and rhetoric starting from here. ZERILLI, ‘We Feel Our Freedom’, pp. 172-176.

⁸⁹ Kant cited in ARENDT, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 40.

opinion, and for what reasons one formed it”.⁹⁰ But it is only in the field of aesthetics that – without abandoning the notion of universal communicability – he is forced to imagine a kind of universal communication that, without the support of universal concepts, has to rely on more political things as ‘common sense’ and to an extra-rational faculty as ‘imagination’.⁹¹ It is on these bases that Arendt gives a political reading of the Kantian version of judgment, the ability to see things “in the perspective of all those who happen to be present” as one of “the fundamental abilities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm, in the common world”.⁹² On this basis, she connects this capacity with the Greek concept of *phronesis*, and she establishes a parallelism between dialoguing about judgments and the idea of *peithein*: the convincing and persuading speech in the *polis*, regarded as the typically political intercourse where not only physical violence, but also the coercion of truth were banned.⁹³

Let’s turn now to the account of judgment that we can draw from this tradition of rhetoric. This art can be understood as a manifestation of the ancient notion of practical reason. In this sense, a first evident point of contact with Arendt is that as in the case of rhetoric, judgment is a capacity that rests on ‘elusive’ grounds because it operates according to rules that cannot be fully conceptualized; or translated into Kant’s language according to a “lawfulness without a law”.⁹⁴ This in its turn connects with the important fact that in Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (as it would be later for the humanists) politics and the art of rhetoric are understood as *praxis*. An idea that was expressed perhaps in the most accomplished way by Quintilian, who envisioned a long and challenging process of personal formation in which the orator would eventually come to fully embody the principle of the

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹¹ KANT, *Critique of Judgment* § XVII, 22, 40-41, 45. Kant, however, had a quite negative conception of oratory, understood as the art of persuasion, which he defines the art “of deceiving by means of a beautiful illusion” and the “art of using people’s weakness for one’s own aims.” What he saved was only rhetoric as “excellence of speech”. KANT, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 1951), §53, pp. 327-328. For a critique, from a rhetorical perspective, of Kant’s notion of ‘universal communicability’ and ‘sociability’ and of Arendt’s recovery of it, see GARSTEN, *Saving Persuasion*, pp. 85-86, 102-103.

⁹² ARENDT, ‘The Crisis in Culture’, p. 221. ARENDT, ‘Introduction into Politics’, pp. 167-168. Cf. ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, p. 192. ARENDT, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, pp. 83-84. ARENDT, ‘Truth and Politics’, p. 556.

⁹³ ARENDT, ‘The Crisis in Culture’, p. 221. Cf. ZERILLI, ‘“We Feel Our Freedom”: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt’, pp. 168-171. R.J. DOSTAL, “Judging Human Action”, in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, eds. R. Beiner and J. Nedlesky, (Boston, 2001), pp. 153-154.

⁹⁴ GARSTEN, ‘The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment’. KANT, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 241.

political art of rhetoric, so that the art comes in a certain sense to disappear into his or her person.⁹⁵ The *Institutio oratoria*, indeed, is certainly one of the most important treatises on civic education in the history of political thought. In this book Quintilian systematized his experience as a teacher exposing the long formative process the orator has to undertake to learn to move not only through “narrow paths”, but to “range at large over the open fields” of politics.⁹⁶ Because the political is the realm of contingency, it was a vain and counterproductive effort for Quintilian to hope to rely on a set of general and well-defined rules. Everything depends, in the last instance, on the responsibility of the individual to know what to do in every circumstance. And if we consider the talkative nature of politics, for these authors, this means above all to be able to communicate correctly; so that for all of them the political *praxis* becomes mainly the *praxis* of communicating well: rhetoric as the *ars bene dicendi*, according to Quintilian’s definition. This is something quite different from mere persuasion, because it is not a question of obtaining the result of persuasion at every cost – as it would be according to an instrumental conception of rhetoric – but rather of learning to employ the correct words in every particular situation for the common good.⁹⁷ This is what rhetorical judgment was essentially all about. Similarly to what taste was for Kant, for rhetoric to judge properly consisted essentially in communicating properly – in both directions: conveying and receiving meaning – a very important social and political capacity (something completely lacking in Eichmann) that could be consolidated and refined through education but that, ultimately, couldn’t be taught.⁹⁸

But if we go a little deeper in our analyse of the rhetorical conception of judgment, then we would start to glimpse a very important point of departure between those rhetors and Arendt. Let’s see why. I have just mentioned that judgment for rhetoric consists essentially in the capacity to speak well, to try to reach an argument about things that cannot be fully proved, involving the capacity of the listeners to judge. In order to do this, the rhetors have

⁹⁵ QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria* I.xi.3, II.xvii.25, XII.v.1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, V.14.31.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, II.5.13-16, II.6.6, II.13.2-4, II.17.25, II.18.3, V.14.31, VI.5.1-11, etc. Quintilian says explicitly that an orator can be still considered a good orator, even if he has not succeeded in persuading, provided that he has been able to speak according to the spirit of the *ars bene dicendi* (*ibid.*, II.xvii.25). Cf. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, p. 26.

⁹⁸ KANT, *Critique of Judgment* § 46-47, 49, 60. In this respect, it is also very suggestive and in accordance with my argument that the Kantian notion of ‘genius’ recalls in various aspect the ideal of the ‘perfect orator’. Cf. CICERO, *De oratore* I.16 and ff., 76 and ff., 94-95, 118, 128-131, 202, II.187, etc. CICERO, *Orator* V.19. QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria* I.x.4, XII.i.20. KANT, *Critique of Judgment* § 46-50.

always underlined that the discourse of an orator should be formed keeping in mind all the infinite contingent circumstances that constitute a unique moment: what the Greeks used to refer to with that almost untranslatable word of *kairos*. This fundamental capacity has been correctly defined “the capstone that gives meaning to the entire structure of the art” of rhetoric.⁹⁹ Arendt would have surely agreed that judgment is essential for grasping the singleness of every historical moment, for trying to understand the unforeseeable, the miraculous character of action. From here, as we have seen, both rhetoric and Arendt draw the crucial conclusion that every moment must be interpreted and judged in its own terms, avoiding linear explication that conducts necessarily from a point X to a conclusion Y and rather revealing it as a unique “crystallization” of countless elements.¹⁰⁰ What is necessary to judge properly, for Arendt and rhetoric, is to reveal the unique meaning of every event rather than to extract its truth; which is also the reason why both believed that ‘storytelling’ – something that “reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” – is the most proper form of discourse in the public sphere.¹⁰¹

Here we find, at last, the important difference I was talking about. Because the rhetorical act of interpretation and judgment includes a fundamental psychological dimension that Arendt explicitly denies. Aristotle was the first to explain it in a systematic way. In his *Rhetoric*, he argued that rhetoric is a kind of discourse that concerns at the same time reason (*logos*), the ethical character (*ethos*), and the emotions (*pathos*). To be persuasive, indeed, what matters is not only the capacity to sustain a cause coherently and reasonably, but also the ethical character of the speaker (and how it appears), and the disposition of the audience. An orator, Aristotle told us, needs to inspire in his listeners trust, and therefore he has to appear as someone morally irreproachable. At the same time, because judgments are deeply influenced by the emotions, he has to know how to influence them in the right direction.¹⁰² But actually it was with Cicero and Quintilian that the capacity of the orator to interpret psychologically the audience and stir its emotions became almost

⁹⁹ J. KINNEAVY, “Kairos in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory”, in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, eds. P. Sipiora and J. S. Baumlin (Albany, New York, 2002), p. 61. PLATO, *Phaedrus* 271d-272b.

¹⁰⁰ H. ARENDT, ‘Walter Benjamin’, in *Men in Dark Times*, p. 205. Cf. ARENDT, ‘The Concept of History’, p. 64. ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. VIII.

¹⁰¹ H. ARENDT, ‘Isak Dinesen’, in *Men in Dark Times*, p. 105.

¹⁰² ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric* 1354a12-14, 1356a1 and ff., 1377b21-24, 1378a19-21. Before Aristotle, we already find in Plato the idea that the good rhetor should be an expert in the nature of the soul, exactly as the doctor is an expert in the nature of the body. Plato, *Phaedrus* 270b1 and ff.

the essence of rhetoric. For the two Roman thinkers, the most important capacity an orator should develop was to be able to sincerely empathize with its audience according to the nature of the facts. And also for them, imagination covered a crucial role, as it is what allows the orator to empathize with the audience, to re-present in his or her mind the feelings, the emotions, the states of mind, and more generally the opinions of the audience.¹⁰³ Moreover, they also argued, precisely as Arendt did, that in order to do that the orator should get a distance from his or her own person, to enlarge his or her own identity, to create the space for the representation of the points of view of all those present, so to make possible that, as Cicero wrote, “being one, I play with equanimity of soul three character: my self, my adversary, and my judge”.¹⁰⁴ But as I have said before, it is precisely this psychological empathy that Arendt explicitly denied, because for her an ‘enlarged mentality’ should not rest on the slippery notion of ‘empathy’, which could mean accepting passively the prejudgments of the others, but rather on the capacity to actively include their points of view. For Arendt, judging is an activity that requires a fundamental moment of interpretation. But this has to occur always from a disinterested and detached point of view: that of the spectator, the only one from where it is possible to reach impartiality; which is certainly not the neutral objectivity of the scientist, but neither the emotive involvement with the interlocutor recommended by rhetoric.¹⁰⁵

I think that the difference on this point has to do in large part with Arendt’s critique of modern subjectivism, which she considered one of the great flaws of modern culture. Clearly, a question too vast to be dealt with on this occasion. What I would like to underline at the end of this essay, however, is that this difference – which recalls the distinction between what rhetoric called the *foro interno* (what happened inside the individual) and the *foro externo* (the public space) – seems to reestablish Arendt on the side of philosophy in the age-long confrontation it held with rhetoric. For her, as it was for many philosophers starting with Plato, only what has an external manifestation can have also a public relevance; to the point that this distinction seems to be for her almost the “source of the reality of man” and the foundation of the public space as such.¹⁰⁶ The great problem with this view

¹⁰³ For instance: QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria*: I.20.30, VI.2.1-7, 12, 26-28, etc. CICERO *De oratore*: II.178, 182, 214.

¹⁰⁴ CICERO, *De oratore* II.102. Translation E. W. Sutton, *De oratore*, Vol. 1, p. 275. Cf. QUINTILIAN, *Institutio oratoria* VI.2.29-31.

¹⁰⁵ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 92-94.

¹⁰⁶ S. DOSSA, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Waterloo, Ont., 1989), p. 105, cf. 41, 49, 135.

is that Arendt, in order to avoid subjectivism, ended up neglecting also the democratic value of the plurality inside the *foro interno*. As it was for Plato, indeed, for her the only politically relevant fact of the *foro interno* is respect of the Socratic-Platonic unity of the soul with itself, which is manifested in a coherent external behaviour.¹⁰⁷ The fact that other extra-rational faculties, politically very important like imagination (as Arendt herself recognized), do not always respect this coherence is not a matter of concern for her. In this sense, it is curious to find in Arendt a distinction that recalls very closely another one we find in the Platonic *Gorgias*: this is the distinction between the mind, the rational part on which we have full control, and the soul, the black box containing the passions.¹⁰⁸ According to Arendt and Plato only the first is politically relevant. For her, it is only the mind that allows us to make the leap from the mere biological to the spiritual, that is, that allows the identity of the individual to emerge in public through action and discourse.¹⁰⁹ With this kind of position, however, she seems to underestimate the great political value emotions and extra-rational faculties can have, that not only ancient rhetoric, but Arendt herself on some occasions has underlined:

Absence of emotions neither causes nor promotes rationality. 'Detachment and equanimity' in view of 'unbearable tragedy' can indeed be 'terrifying,' namely, when they are not the result of control but an evident manifestation of incomprehension. In order to respond reasonably one must first of all be 'moved', and the opposite of emotional is not 'rational', whatever that may mean, but either the inability to be moved, usually a pathological phenomenon, or sentimentality, which is the perversion of feeling.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ BENHABIB, 'Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought', pp. 44-45. GARSTEN, 'The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment', pp. 1089-1090.

¹⁰⁸ According to Seth Benardete, this distinction is introduced by Socrates in the *Gorgias* when, starting his conversation with Gorgias, he asked him to avoid talking with long discourses (macrology) and to proceed instead through questions and short answers (brachylogy) (PLATO, *Gorgias* 449c). Socrates, Benardete notes, has in mind the way of proving of mathematics, which can be reduced to a series of short questions and even shorter answers. But this kind of dialogue, as all strictly logical arguments, permits only to the rational part to emerge, leaving all the rest in obscurity. With his request, therefore, Socrates introduces a distinction between the 'mind' – the rational part – and the 'soul' – which includes also the extra-rational – that authorizing only the first "might be fatal to any psychology." S. BENARDETE, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy: Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 12-13.

¹⁰⁹ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 71-74. Cf.: R. CAVALIERE VITI, *Critica della vita intima. Soggettività e giudizio in Hannah Arendt* (Naples, 2005), p. 17. In this book, Renata Cavaliere Viti offers a very interesting analysis of the question of the emotions in Arendt.

¹¹⁰ H. ARENDT, 'On Violence', in *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience, On Violence, Thoughts on Politics and Revolution* (New York, 1972), p. 161. Among her writings, I have found also another occasion in which Arendt held a different position on psychological empathy. This is in her reply to Eric Voegelin's review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where

CONCLUSION

I have started this paper suggesting that, seen in the context of western philosophy, Hannah Arendt may appear as a quite lonely figure. And indeed, once we plunge into her works we realize that this perception is not so mistaken. Probably she would have explained this fact noting that she has been one of the few philosophers firmly convinced that a “true political philosophy” can emerge only making “the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs – in its grandeur and misery – the object of *thaumadzein*”.¹¹¹ Be that as it may, certainly it is not a coincidence that in her thought we can find such deep affinities with a particular tradition of ancient rhetoric, which always had great respect for politics. A tradition that, moreover, had a confrontation with philosophy, decisive for the history of political thought over the meaning of the relationship between philosophy and politics. In this essay I have attempted to bring to the fore the particular kind of humanism that lies behind the affinity between Arendt and this version of rhetoric: a humanism that emphasizes the relativeness and finitude of human beings, on the one hand, and their freedom, on the other. From this common ground, I have tried to show how in both cases we get approaches to politics that strive to extrapolate the resources to deal with it from its very dynamics and in particular from its actors, the citizens, rather than from some external realm. And here, we may say, lies their democratic potential, as by locating in a generalized capacity to judge and in dialogue and persuasion two of the basic factors of citizenship, they depict a vision of politics as a demanding, but intrinsically inclusive activity.

the reviewer criticized the author for an excessive emotive identification with the victims, which made her lose the necessary detachment from the subject-matter. In her response, Arendt replied differentiating among emotive involvement and sentimentalism, sustaining that the first is not to be condemned as it can help the historian to grasp the real relevance of historical events. H. ARENDT, ‘The Origins of Totalitarianism: A Reply’, *Review of Politics*, 15 (1953), pp. 76-84, here pp. 78-79.

¹¹¹ ARENDT, ‘Philosophy and Politics’, p. 103.

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