# “Between himself and the world” / “Between himself and reality:” On World Alienation

“The increase in power of man over the things of this world springs in either case from the distance which man puts between himself and the world, that is, from world alienation.”
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

“The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can be only oneself. Such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes.”
James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region of My Mind”

Hannah Arendt’s theory of the public offers resources to 1) sustain and enlarge our common (democratic) world and 2) identify the main threats that prevent such care for the world from taking place. In *The Human Condition* (1998 [1958]), Arendt explains that “public” refers to “two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena” (50). The first is the phenomenon of publicity. Something that appears in a public space can be sensed by everybody. Second, public refers to “the world itself,” a space that each one of us has in common. In this second sense, a space or an object is public not because it can be sensed and accessed by all but because it relates-and-separates us. The “world itself” is an objective in-between space that brings us together in our individual particularity.

It is worth noting that Arendt’s interrelation of the phenomenon of publicity and the concept of the world as the common object par excellence brings together the perception of individual subjects, the discursive context under which these perceptions take place, and the physical/material space that we inhabit.[1] To cultivate and maintain a democratic public we must be attuned to how these three different ‘parts’ relate to each other. The phenomenon of publicity, for example, refers to what Arendt calls “appearance,” “something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves” (1998 [1958], 50). Arendt observes that thanks to our perceiving-with-others we get a sense of reality. “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves,” she writes. Hence, what we would call a ‘reality check.’ How do we generate reality checks? And what are the dangers to such a conception of the public?

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[1] My distinction between the material and the discursive is purely schematic. In reality, these two are enmeshed.

Currently, the phenomena that Arendt designates as “public” are under threat by what Bonnie Honig, following Naomi Klein (2007), calls “the shock politics two-step” (2021). The first step of shock politics is deprivation. The rise of neoliberalism makes our public spaces and things increasingly vulnerable to their privatization.[2] Privatization tears away the gravitational pull of public things, thereby hollowing out our democratic world. In other words, we are increasingly deprived of stable points of orientation that can stimulate in us democratic sensibilities. After deprivation comes saturation. Our media ecosystems saturate us with “a flood of misinformation and false cues” (15). Without common points of orientation, this deluge washes over us and we are left unmoored. In short, if Arendtian publicity refers to our ability to sense—and make sense of—appearances with others, shock politics tampers with our capacity to do so by flooding our “senses with stimuli such that we are overwhelmed, desensitized, and disoriented, left nearly incapable of response or action because we are confused, exhausted, or fatigued” (13). The shock politics two-step, therefore, leaves us in a state of “sensorial precarity.”

In this paper, I explore some of the conditions that enable such flights from reality to take off the ground. When “nothing seems to make much sense anymore” (Arendt 1977, 11), how do we get new bearings that shore up our commitment to the world that we have in common? I aim to rework Arendt's concept of world alienation and propose that it provides us with a useful theoretical framework to deepen our understanding of the contemporary shock politics of disorientation and desensitization that threaten democratic politics. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that world alienation is the character of the modern age and one of the most pressing political problems of modernity. World alienation, she explains, is a withdrawal from the materiality of the world and into the interiority of our minds. Put otherwise, world alienation is a disavowal of the objectivity and publicity of the world that is the result of an increasingly prominent subjectivism.

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[2] It is worth noting that in her discussion of the private and the public realms in *The Human Condition* Arendt uses the term private “in its original privative sense” (1998 [1958], 58). To be in the private realm means that one is “deprived” from the phenomena of publicity. In the private realm one does not sense-with others in plurality. To be sure, Arendt admits that one must have a private realm to retreat towards and feel “sheltered” (59). The problem arises when “men become entirely private” (58). It is under such circumstances that “they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them.” Privatization of public things tends to make humans entirely private, thereby depriving us from practices of common sensing.

Whereas Arendt uses world alienation to name the solipsistic withdrawal of individuals, I want to expand this concept so that it also names the hermeticism of social and political groups. World alienation in this reworked sense is not simply a solipsistic withdrawal into one's mind, but a hermetic withdrawal from the common world that is needed for a democratic community to exist. The subjectivism of world alienation as I understand it is therefore not individual, but group based. More specifically, I argue that we become world-alienated when the conditions under which we attune toward the normative claim of plurality are negated. This suggests that an important task of democratic politics is the generation of cotexts under which we can, first, sense plurality and, second, orient towards its normative claim. World alienation offers us generative interpretive tools because it enables us to approach pressing political problems such as mis- and dis-information phenomenologically. That is, the solution to this type of problem is not epistemic in the narrow sense of the word. Though contemporary shock politics has an epistemic dimension, as I will explain later, this must be understood as a function of our orientation in and towards the world. Are our orientations conducive to sensing the plurality found in the world? Or are our orientations hermetic, thereby alienating us from such plurality?

In the first section, I elucidate Arendt's conception of the world as the common object par excellence and its relation to the notion of plurality. My aim here is to establish the phenomenological conditions under which we attune to plurality and explain why plurality makes a normative claim on us. In the second section I think with and against Arendt to rework her concept of world alienation. Besides focusing on group-based hermeticism vis à vis subjective solipsism, I argue, with the help of Charles Mills and James Baldwin, that contemporary world alienation has epistemic and subject-formation dimensions. I conclude by suggesting that Arendt's notion of common sense as our "sixth sense" might offer one solution to the problem of world alienation.

## The World of Phenomenal Appearances

The world is a central concept in Arendt's political thought. At its most basic, the world is Arendt's name for the human artifice, the constellation of durable things, themselves objects of our work, that outlast the lifespan of any given human being.[3] Thanks to their durability, the things that furnish the world have a "relative independence" from those who produced them (Arendt 1998[1958], 137). Arendt calls this independence "objectivity." Objectivity makes things "withstand, 'stand against' and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users." Put in different terms, the objectivity and durability of things stand in contrast to what Arendt sees as the endless cyclicality of our biological life processes.

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[3] For the purposes of this paper, I do not get into the distinction between world and earth. A way of reading *The Human Condition*, where the conceptual distinction between the two is most evident, is to emphasize the world as exclusively the product of human work and the earth as the realm of Nature. This distinction becomes more tenuous in Arendt's late work such as *Life of the Mind: Thinking* (1971). Following Laura Ephraim, I think that it is more fruitful to emphasize the main similarity between earth and world. Namely, that both have "the ontological propensity to appear between us" (2018, 36). In their appearingness, both earth and world help establish "the conditions for life in common." I begin to elaborate the concept of appearance on page 9.

Kimberly Curtis describes this cyclicality as a "repetitious background" to which all of us, by being alive, are subjected (1999, 26). Our aliveness means that we have necessities, such as eating, that endlessly return and that we must attend to. In their durability and objectivity, things stand against—stand out of— this processual background and have the "function of stabilizing human life" (Arendt 1998[1958], 137).

How do these durable and objective things—tables, poems, libraries—constellate to form the world? In a famous passage, Arendt observes that "things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not *the conditioners* of human existence" (1998[1958], 9. My emphasis). Things function as an anchor, one which shapes the contours of the parameters under which we can live our lives. Importantly, things condition human existence differently depending on the standpoint of each human activity (i.e., labor, work, and action).[4] From the standpoint of homo faber, for example, we orient towards things from a purely means-ends perspective. Homo faber homogenizes the domain of operation of any given object. Marlow's famous hammer comes to mind here: 'if all you have is a hammer, it is tempting to see everything as a nail.' Thus, disorientation is the problem with how things condition homo faber. If we turn everything into a nail when we hold a hammer, then we lose track of what a nail is, as well as losing track of everything else. Arendt calls this "the dilemma of meaninglessness" (155). Though homo faber fabricates the objects that will constellate into the world, the gravitational pull that brings them into orbit with each other cannot be provided by homo faber's instrumental rationality. Homo faber is "incapable of understanding meaning."

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[4] The case of labor is an interesting one. From the standpoint of labor things are consumed, which means that things do not survive the activity for which they are, well, consumed. In this sense things do not have the objectivity and durability needed for them to be able to form a world. The problem of labor is wordlessness.

It is from the standpoint of action that the “heap of unrelated articles” constellates into the world; it is only through the gift of action that objects are infused with meaning. We have seen that for homo faber work objects condition us by providing predetermined use.[5] Fortunately, objects are not just fabricated. They also appear phenomenally. This means that objects can be sensed from a plurality of perspectives and positions. Scholars such as Curtis (1999), Cecilia Sjöholm (2015), and Laura Ephraim (2018) take Arendt’s emphasis on appearance as evidence of an Arendtian aesthetics that enables things to always have the potential to transcend their premeditated usefulness. It is this transcendence of strict functionalism that arises out of our plural engagement with the things of the world that provides a model for the miraculous quality of beginning things anew that Arendt cherishes in her account of political action. In their appearance, things transcend their usefulness because they can be perceived in innumerable and unexpected ways. Thinking with Sara Ahmed, for example, that things appear—how they appear to us in our particularity—allows us to give them “queer uses” (2019). They may queer *us* too.

In short, from the standpoint of action things are the conditioners of human existence because humans and things are mutually “coimplicated” (Honig 2017, 39). Speaking of this coimplication, Ephraim writes that in our engagement with things we “instantiate relations of proximity, affinity, resemblance, or repulsion among disparate human and non-human beings, excluding some from assemblages that secure the power, prestige, and visibility of others” (2018, 4). The permanence and durability of things and, more importantly, how they constellate together, is a necessary condition for embodied practices of relationality to take place: relation to other human beings, non-humans, and our environment. Notably, these practices of relationality might be practices of domination and exclusion that shore up the power of some while marginalizing others.

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[5] An object-oriented reading of Arendt’s three permanent and fundamental human activities of labor, work, and action would emphasize that from the standpoint of labor we consume objects, from the standpoint of work we use them, and from the standpoint of action they serve as markers of meaning.

The most iconic example Arendt gives to explain how things condition us is that of the table. The table is a metaphor for the world; it is something that separates and joins people. By being "located between those who sit around it," the table "relates and separates men at the same time" (Arendt 1958 [1998], 52). It relates us because it provides us with a physical space around which we can gather that also remains in existence when we stop gathering around it. Furthermore, the table provides those sitting around it with distinct spatial coordinates while still holding everyone together. It is worth thinking here not just about *the* table but about the multiple tables that separate and join people seated around them for different occasions. Notably, Arendt's famous table relates people in the uncanny context of "a spiritualistic séance" (53). Contexts of world alienation—when "the world between [people] has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and separate them"—resemble a séance, where the séance table around which people gather "might suddenly, through some magic trick […] vanish from their midst."

The various ways in which things relate-and-separate us then "are not neutral but directive" (Ahmed 2006, 81). We might look, as Ahmed does, not at an uncanny séance table but at a much more familiar dinner table. A family dinner table gathers us on multiple occasions for kinship purposes. When we see a table as a kinship object, we might realize that it relates-and-separates us along familial lines. My dad sits at the head, for he is the "head" of the family. Ahmed's insight is that what such a table is coimplicated in is the particular meaning of family in a cis-heteropatriarchal context. Family dinner tables are coimplicated in the social reproduction of the father as the head of the household. It is in this sense that the tableau formed by families gathering around dinner tables forms a particular "assemblage that secures the power, prestige, and visibility" (Ephraim 2018, 4) of some at the expense of others.

So, the world is the constellation of things that provides stability for human life. It is what stands against the repetitious background of the realm of necessity. Importantly, we have now seen that how things constellate is also imbricated with asymmetries of power and social reproduction. The stabilizing effect of the world is therefore always laden with relations of power. Why is it then that the world is of such central importance to Arendt's account of politics? The short answer is that thanks to the world we can exist in plurality. And for Arendt plurality is the sine qua non of politics (1998 [1958], 7). Famously, Arendtian "plurality refers to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world." In addition, it "has the twofold character of equality and distinction" (175). On the one hand, equality is a claim about the political standing of all individuals that has epistemic implications. If humans were not equal, Arendt observes, they "could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them." That we are capable of collectively undertaking projects in common reveals this type of equality. Distinction, on the other hand, refers to our individual uniqueness. If we were not distinct from each other, we would have "identical needs and wants" and no need for any sort of complex language to communicate them. But since we are individually unique, we must express ourselves in word and deed to make ourselves understood. And we can be understood by and understand others because we qua human beings share in a sense some elemental features, such as basic needs and vulnerabilities (Benhabib 2018, 91-92).

It is important to schematically separate the *fact* of plurality from its twofold character. Doing so allows us to better understand where asymmetries of power and their social reproduction fit into this model. On the one hand, plurality is an empirical fact. To anticipate my next discussion, the world is populated by a multitude of diverse peoples, objects, and other living beings-appearances. To this *fact*, Arendt adds what I take to be a normative claim: to sense the fact of plurality *ought* to mean that we grasp its twofold character of equality and distinction. To sense the fact of plurality in the normative sense is to appreciate and accept—to acknowledge—the equal standing of others and to value their distinctive identities But, as we will also see later on, facts do not speak for themselves; it does not follow that from the fact of plurality we will automatically be attuned and oriented to its normative claim of equality and distinction. Borrowing an evocative metaphor from Ephraim we could say that in instances when we fail to hear the normative call of plurality, we find "a way of severing some of the strands of the world's relational web and knotting others more tightly" (2018, 18). I find Ephraim's web metaphor useful because it emphasizes that there is one world, one which is inhabited by "men." Yet, at the same time, the world is a space where some of its strands are woven in such a way that privileges some at the expense of others.

What are the conditions under which we can be attuned to the normative claim of plurality and why might we miss its call? Before answering this question, we must turn to Arendt's discussion of the concept of appearance. Though "appearance" is featured prominently in *The Human Condition*, where Arendt writes of "the space of appearance" as the public realm where we come together in word and deed, it is only until her late work *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* that she explicitly develops her account of it. She begins that work with the following beautiful paragraph, well worth quoting in its entirety:

> The world men are born into contains many things, natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal, all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs. Nothing could appear,

> the word "appearance" would make no sense, if recipients of appearances did not exist—living creatures able to acknowledge, recognize, and react to—in flight or desire, approval or disapproval, blame or praise—what is not merely there but appears to them and is meant for their perception. In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*. Dead matter, natural and artificial, changing and unchanging, depends in its being, that is, in its appearingness, on the presence of living creatures. Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*. In other words, nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth. (1977, 19. Emphasis on original)

There are three aspects to note here that will give us a good sense of why appearance is crucial for Arendt's worldly politics: 1) in the world being and appearing coincide; 2) appearance is plural; 3) there is a doubleness to appearance, we are both spectators (i.e., those who receive appearances) *and* appearances ourselves.

Being and appearing coincide. With this phrase, Arendt criticizes what she calls the metaphysical fallacy of true Being versus mere appearance that haunts Western philosophy (1977, 23-30). This fallacy posits that appearances, how things present to us in our senses, act as a cloak that hides the True essence—Being—of an object. Under this "two-world theory" we must penetrate the opaque surface provided by appearances to reach the "Truth" that is Being. This is far from a philosophical argument. Indeed, Arendt sees modern science as the main culprit in inducing the paradigm shift that severs the worldly coincidence between appearance and being.

It is in this context that we can understand Arendt's critique of Galileo in *The Human Condition* at the start of the "Vita Activa and the Modern Age."[6] With the advent of the telescope, we become able to see aspects of the universe inaccessible to our unaided senses.[7] Ephraim explains the seismic political implications of this. The telescope brings into existence "a practice of spectatorship that *refuses* to receive earth's gifts of appearances and [expresses] a preference for phenomena that withhold themselves from the naked eye" (Ephraim 2018, 57). The problem with preferring this type of phenomenon is that they are unable to relate-and-separate us. Only phenomena and things that can be accessed via multiple senses from multiple different spatial positionings, such as a table, "have the capacity to separate and connect spectators, in the plural, from their various standpoints." Only in the *coincidence* of being and appearance, that is in an orientation that does not refuse how things appear in favor of finding their hidden and inaccessible-in-ordinary-experience Being, can we be in the world.

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[6] For an excellent reading of Arendt's critique of Galileo and modern science see chapter one of Ephraim's *Who Speaks for Nature: On the Politics of Science* (2018).

This brings us to the potential of plurality inherent in all appearances. The heterogeneous things and phenomena that constellate into the world we are born into are not "merely there" according to Arendt (1977, 19). Instead, they *appear* to us. I read Arendt's use of the "merely there" as a way of describing something that is fully given and not open to a different form of apprehension. The closest example of this in her work I can think of would be her discussions of logical operations in *The Human Condition* (283). An operation like 2 + 2 = 4 would be "merely there" in that there is nothing else to it.[8] It is something that is truly the same for everyone.[9] On the contrary, as we have seen, the things of the world can be apprehended from a plurality of perspectives and positions. They appear differently to our multiple senses. Against the total unity—the nothing-else-to-it-ness—of "thereness," appearance, given the *fact* of plurality, always already entails a multiplicity of both senses and sensers. This means that appearances appear to us in the form of the dokei-moi, the it-seems-to-me. "To appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and perspective of the spectators," explains Arendt (1977, 21).

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[7] It is notable that this paradigm shift is itself caused by a durable and objective thing. One way of thinking about this is that the telescope itself can provide us with the commonness (i.e., relation and separation) needed to establish the world, but that this is not the case with the phenomena that we see when using the telescope. On the contrary, when one uses a telescope qua telescope, one retreats from the phenomena and the objects that provide the conditions for establishing a world. When one uses the telescope, one retreats from the world.

[8] Though Wittgenstein's insights in *Philosophical Investigations* on the language game of adding by twos show that even something as seemingly as self-evident as 2+2=4 is an invitation to participating in a particular form of life. Even the seemingly most self-evident and simple language game presupposes the most sophisticated form of communication.

[9] Commonness and sameness are quite distinct in Arendt's view. A significant political consequence of world alienation is the substitution of the latter with the former. With the rise of introspection and the loss of common sense, Arendt explains, "what men now have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking; their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody" (1998[1958], 283).

Lastly, it is not simply durable and objective things that appear. The world is populated by all sorts of appearances, including ourselves. What we might call living appearances, both human and non-human, have a doubleness to them. We receive appearances *and* appear to others as well. Curtis refers to this doubleness as Arendt's "ontology of self-display" (1999). She writes that in Arendt's discussion of appearances

> "we find an ontology of display suggesting that reality in an appearing world is something born out of a highly charged mutually sensuous provocation between actors and spectators that is essentially aesthetic in nature. All living creatures are in this respect linked together in a continuous though developmentally differentiated whole. Arendt uses the language of "impulse," "urge," and "spontaneity" to underline the mysterious "given" quality to this conception of the nature of the world. Here we have a universe alive with yearning to sense and be sensed, a universe that perpetually gives birth to its own plurality and profusion." (31)

Arendt takes the idea of spontaneous display from the zoologist Adolf Portmann, who argues that living beings-appearances have "an urge to self-display" (Portmann in Arendt 1977, 29).[10] This urge is important because it shows that we are not simply in the world but *of* the world and allows us to display our individual uniqueness. Only in our individual uniqueness can we appear as *who* we are instead of *what* we are. In contradistinction to our individual uniqueness (i.e., the *who*), which is infused in everything we do and usually available only to others, the "what" refers to a description of ascriptive qualities that we share with others such as race, class, and gender.[11] Only when we are attuned to the plurality of appearances we can see the particularity of others vis à vis these more generalized qualities.

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[10] Merleau-Ponty's influence in this aspect of Arendt's thought is evident as well. Arendt explains that "whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch present itself to be touched" (29). This echoes Merleau-Ponty's observation in *The Visible and the Invisible* that "he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*" (1968, 134-135). This of-it-ness described by Merleau-Ponty is what he calls the chiasm, the reversibility of being a sensing "subject" *and* an "object" of sensation such that the subject/object distinction is rendered moot. In Arendt I called this the doubleness of appearance.

To sum up, appearance is the mode through which we access the world *and* the mode in which we inhabit it. Appearances always carry the potential of plurality because they can be apprehended in multiple ways. We can perceive things differently depending on our spatial positioning and the senses we use in our apprehension. Most importantly, this means that in their appearance the things of the world relate-and-separate us. This is what I understand as common objects. Following Arendt, common is precisely this connection created through distinction. The world—populated by a dazzling display of appearances—is the common par excellence. As we have seen, however, the world's relational web has some knottier strands than others. In our coimplication with things we form assemblages that secure certain configurations of power. These knottier strands might make it harder for us to sense the *fact* of plurality and heed its normative call. In this sense, the world is not simply the human artifice that provides stability to human life. It is also a political project that needs cultivation. How might we weave the world's relational web so that we are attuned to the normative claim of plurality? Under what conditions do we miss this claim? When we fail to sense "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world," we become alienated from the world. And in this alienation, we risk losing it.

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[11] Arendt writes: "On the contrary, it is more than likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimōn* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters" (1998 [1958], 179-180).

## On World Alienation

Arendt introduces the concept of world alienation in the prologue of *The Human Condition*. Besides giving an account of the vita activa in terms of its permanent and fundamental human activities of labor, work, and action, Arendt aims to do a historical analysis that traces "back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins" (1998 [1958], 6). Arendt understands world alienation as the character of the modern age and argues that its two types of (interrelated) withdrawals become ever more pervasive from the beginning of the 17th century onwards.

First, we have the "flight from the earth into the universe." This is an attempt to reach the famous Archimedean point from which we can take a universal (instead of an earthly) perspective, which allows us "to act as though we were dwellers of the universe" (Arendt 1998 [1958], 3). The exemplary case here is modern science. Not only are we able to increasingly generate and replicate cosmic processes (such as splitting the atom, biotechnology, etc.) that escape our ordinary understanding,[12] but the grammar of science itself (i.e., scientism) increasingly becomes the lens through which we understand non-scientific aspects of our lives, such as politics.

The second withdrawal Arendt observes is "from the world into the self" (1998[1958], 6). Here the paradigmatic case is modern Western philosophy, Cartesian doubt in particular. Arendt interprets the Cartesian cogito as "a certain mode of subjectivity that cuts us off from the world" (Zerilli 2016, 298). Like the "discovery" of the Archimedean point, Cartesian doubt ushers in a paradigm shift. We now realize that “man had been deceived so long as he trusted that reality and truth would reveal themselves to his senses and to his reason if only he remained true to what he saw with the eyes of the body and mind” (Arendt 1998[1958], 274). With the rise and sedimentation of Cartesian doubt, “Being and Appearance part company forever” (275). Hereby the only certainty we have is introspective. “Reality” therefore stops being an intersubjective phenomenon; it can no longer be granted by a plurality of perspectives on common appearances. For the Cartesian subject reality is granted by “the conceptual categories of his or her own mind” (Zerilli 2016, 298), by our sheer cognitive functioning.

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[12] Arendt seems to attribute a tragic dissonance to the retreat from our earthboundedness. On the one hand, she does not doubt that modern humans have the capabilities of generating and replicating cosmic processes. On the other, however, Arendt is bullish that we will be able to *make sense out of* our increasingly universal capabilities. Yes, we continue to create and unleash spectacular universal processes. "But it could be," she warns, that we "will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do" (1998 [1958], 3).

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of Arendt’s portrayal of these types of phenomena, in particular her critique of science in *The Human Condition*. Arendt is right in observing that increasingly applying the grammar of science to political phenomena will impoverish our understanding of such phenomena because scientism makes us think of intractably particular phenomena in universal terms. That is, we attempt to categorize, and, in our categorizing, we deflect the critical (political) task of judging particulars, spending our energies instead on *applying* categories to such particulars. This being said, in drawing such a hard boundary between science and the realm of human affairs, Arendt seems to fail to see how scientific study might help us illuminate the earth rather than turning us away from it.

The most generous reading might be the following. Whereas scientific study establishes factual truths, we make sense of phenomena not simply by establishing truths but by generating meaning. Meaning, on the one hand, arises from our collective capacity to think and speak with each other about both phenomena and events that occur in the world and more “abstract” ideals, desires, fears, etc. On the other hand, factual truth has a “compelling force” (Arendt 1969 [1967], 240). Once acknowledged *as such*, factual truth is beyond the sort of dispute that meaning arises out of. Of course, truth and meaning ought to be linked. Our opinions, decision-making processes, and how we make sense of things should be informed by factual truths.

The problem arises when we "interpret meaning on the model of truth" (Arendt 1977, 15). We can clarify this by way of an analogy to the different ways that things condition us depending on the standpoint of each human activity (i.e., labor, work, and action). Interpreting meaning on the model of truth is analogous to the way that objects condition homo faber. Instead of wielding a hammer and turning everything into a nail, wielding the grammar of science in such a way turns everything into an object of scientific study. In our modern attempt to grant meaning the same "compelling force" that truth has, we distance ourselves from the contingency and friction that is part and parcel of worldly events and phenomena. We thus mistake the domain of operation of meaning. Meaning is no longer the result of political judgment (i.e., reflective judgment, judgment without the banisters that are categories) but of the correct subsumption of particulars into universals (i.e., the correct application of categories). From the standpoint of meaning, on the contrary, we realize that for the factual truths established by scientific study to 'enter' the world, they need to be 'translated' into ordinary language (Snir 2015, 372-373). If scientific study is to illuminate the earth, we need to make it meaningful. By putting it within an interpretive context that extends beyond any given scientific community, we make such phenomena public.

In any case, Arendt's conception of world alienation is theoretically useful insofar as it focuses on "our estrangement from the objective material world" (Ring 1989, 433) and its interrelated withdrawal from the phenomenon of publicity. If the world acts like a table, separating-and-relating multiple unique individuals, then world alienation refers to the set of phenomena wherein the binding work of common objects is lost. The metaphor for world alienation then is that of the séance table. If appearances are things that are seen and heard by others as well as ourselves, then world alienation refers to their scéancification. Scéancified objects disorient, thereby tampering with our ability to sense with others.

Linda Zerilli understands this loss of objectivity and overwhelming disorientation by referring to "the radical change" in our use of the concept of perspective (2016, 35-36). Ordinarily, perspective is the notion that there is an object in common that is sensed from multiple positions. With the rise of radical subjectivism, the emphasis on objects that we have perspectives *on* dwindles. What we have now, Zerilli explains, is "only perspectives and more perspectives (understood, for example, as competing cultural or worldviews)" (36). To be clear, the pluralization of perspectives is critical if we are to cultivate a more democratic world. Public things emerge and we reaffirm and renew them partly out of the contestations that we have *of* them. They are what they are *because* they appear differently to each of us. We can be part of the grand tapestry of the world in our individual uniqueness because "the subjectivity of the it-seems-to-me is remedied by the fact that the same object also appears to others thought its mode of appearance might be different" (Arendt 1977, 50). Our sense of reality is thus enlarged and deepened by having multiple and diverse perspectives on any given phenomenon. The subjectivization of perspective that Zerilli speaks of refers to the loss of such objectivity. Objective perspective acknowledges the objects that mediate one's perspective whereas subjective perspective disavows such objectivity.[13] Hereby our dokei-mois become mere subjective preferences that, at best, need to be adjudicated and, at worst, are completely incommensurable with each other. What is lost is the notion of having different perspectives *on* phenomena that we have *in common*. Such a loss deprives us of the publicity needed to be in plurality.

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[13] In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (2008 [1900]), Henri Bergson mentions that Don Quixote suffers from a similar type of (dis)orientation to the world. Don Quixote's "very special inversion of common sense" "consists in seeking to mould things on an idea of one's own, instead of moulding one's ideas on things, —in seeing before us what we are thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see" (87).

There are plenty of contemporary cases of this preoccupying tendency to fully subjectivize our perspective by severing it from the common objects that democracies constellate around. One type of case is what we might call "perspectivization," whereby one transforms a factual statement (or a statement that claims to be factual) into a subjective opinion by saying something along the lines of "well that is just one perspective." Take, for example, Mark Kampf, the interim county clerk of Nye County, Nevada. In an interview with CNN ahead of the 2022 midterm elections, Kampf was pressed on his (baseless) claim that recent US elections have been fraudulent, specifically because of the use of electronic voting machines. The interviewer explains that voting machines go through various security processes, have no internet connectivity, and are regulated across the country. Instead of contesting any of these factual claims, Kampf transforms them into just another opinion by replying "that's a perspective." He goes on to say that "there are a lot of people, again the voters in this county, [who] don't believe that [voting machines are not fraudulent] and whether it's true or not their perception is their reality" (Schouten 2022).

Kampf's utterance casts doubt into verifiable features (that have been already verified) of a public thing—democratic elections synecdochically represented by voting machines—and cloaks the public thing behind an inscrutable veil. Notably, then, Kampf's move is not to challenge the veracity of the interviewer's claim per se. A challenge of this sort, incorrect as it might be, could open an avenue for contestation. Instead, Kampf renders the very idea of veracity meaningless. "Whether it is true or not" is unimportant because according to Kampf, for Nye County voters "their perception is their reality." There is a complete detachment of perception from any actual object that can be perceived by a plurality of others. By making this claim Kampf disavows the phenomenon of publicity and forecloses the possibility of a common world. In a democratic world, the act of perceiving with a plurality of others assures reality. Democratic meaning-making attunes, values, and acknowledges how multiple perspectives contribute to our making sense of the world.

The problem of perspectivization highlights that there is another important aspect to our estrangement from the objects that we have in common that Arendt does not explicitly discuss. In our estrangement from our common world, we also estrange ourselves from the fact of plurality. In this sense world alienation is not simply a withdrawal from the world in the twofold way Arendt describes. More importantly for our present context, world alienation is also an orientation towards the world that is encased within a hermetic "perspective."[14] This is an aspect of world alienation because hermeticism loses sight of the fact that the world and its appearances entail a plurality of perspectives *on* them. Hermeticism takes a particular dokei-moi and constructs it as Reality.

What are the procedures of contemporary world alienation? As generative as Arendt's conception of world alienation is, we need to move beyond her to answer this question. I propose that world alienation has two main interrelated dimensions, an epistemic and a subject-formation dimension. Epistemically, world alienation generates conditions for not knowing the fact of plurality. Importantly, these conditions of not knowing are not the result of a lack of access to the pertinent information that would alleviate such non-knowing. As the example of (the aptly named) Mark Kampf highlights, the issue there was not a lack of factual information on the US electoral process and the voting machines used in it. Rather, the problem is that groups living in an allegedly democratic society are taking a particularly hermetic "perspective" and construing it as being coterminous with reality as a whole.

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[14] I put "perspective" in quotations to emphasize its "radical change." Contra perspective, which emphasizes that we have different perspectives *on* objects that we have in common, "perspective" refers to those subjective preferences that lose sight of such common objects.

In this sense, the epistemic aspect of world alienation is similar to work in political philosophy that investigates "epistemologies of ignorance" (Sullivan and Tuana 2007). According to Charles Mills, an epistemology of ignorance takes ignorance not simply as a condition of not knowing that can be remedied with access to relevant information or other knowledge-making practices. Instead, certain types of ignorance are a form of substantive epistemic (mal)practice that is generated by structural systems of oppression. Mills specifically theorizes how a white supremacist system generates "white ignorance" as a form of "structural group-based miscognition" that makes whites unable to see some factual features of the world that are glaringly evident to nonwhites (2007, 13).

This sort of "willful ignorance" (Alcoff 2007, 39) that ironically prevents whites from understanding "the world they themselves have made"[15] (Mills 1999, 18) is potently captured in James Baldwin's 1962 essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind." As George Shulman observes, a key (if not *the* key) aspect of Baldwin's critical-political project is to have his "white readers 'see' race, which is invisible to them" (2017, 151). There is an important resonance between Baldwin and Mills. Both emphasize that racial domination has a purposefully self-cloaking character; whites willfully ignore the racial domination that they nonetheless perpetuate and benefit from. However, whereas Mills's project can be characterized by charting the arc from ignorance to knowledge, Baldwin's project is concerned with charting the arc "from innocence to acknowledgment" (Shulman 2017, 154). White innocence goes one step further then and emphasizes that the disavowal of racial domination is a problem of equal magnitude as racial domination itself.

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[15] It is safe to assume that Arendt did not have in mind this type of phenomenon when writing the prologue to *The Human Condition*. There, she writes that in our cosmic escape from our earthboundedness we become "unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do" (1998 [1958], 3). We are now in a position to rework this insight. The epistemic dimension of world alienation prevents whites from understanding "the things which nevertheless we are able to do," which is, as Mills convincingly argues, "the world they themselves have made."

Contra Mills, who casts epistemic white ignorance as a "cognitive tendency" (2007, 20), Baldwin frames the problem more explicitly as a function of our phenomenological orientation in and towards the world. Baldwin thus writes a phenomenology of innocence. White innocence percolates into every aspect of American life. In Baldwin's "Letter," this leads to severe obfuscation and withdrawal from reality. It is this "inability" of white Americans to "renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult" (Baldwin 1962, 20). This alienation is not narrowly epistemic but is rather phenomenological and affective. Its defining feature is joylessness that reflects a terror of sensuality (19-21). "To be sensual," explains Baldwin, "is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread" (19). The disavowal of racial domination by white Americans, therefore, entails a turning away from our sensuousness; our very senses and our subsequent capacity to sense the plurality found in the world diminishes. It is crucial to emphasize that this colors even the banalest of experiences, such as "the breaking of bread." "It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it" (Baldwin 1962, 19). Baldwin's phenomenology of innocence highlights that the disavowal of racial domination is even present in our very (mis)understanding of what bread is. Or, that the blunting of our sensorium that is needed for maintaining the semblance of white innocence is coimplicated with the deformation of bread into "blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber." All of this highlights that white ignorance and white innocence generate an impoverished and alienating sense of the world.

In terms of subject-formation, world alienation generates an impoverished understanding of democratic citizenship that is deleterious for a democratic community. If democratic life is sustained by public things and our mode of access to such things is via appearance, then a crucial part of democratic citizenship is the practice of sensing with a plurality of others. That is, democratic citizenship entails an orientation to the world that acknowledges, on the one hand, the limits of one's perspectivity and, on the other, the essential importance of a multiplicity of dokeimois for our collective capacity to assure the reality of our democratic world.

An example of how world alienation creates an impoverished understanding of citizenship is what Juliet Hooker calls "white grievance" (2017). White grievance is the mobilization of "a sense of white victimhood" in response to symbolic and material gains made by non-white political subjects (485). It is "a distorted form of racial political math that sees black gains as white losses, and not simply losses but defeats." White grievance is an orientation to the world that (mis)reads the world as a site of mastery for white subjects. Put otherwise, white grievance is exclusively oriented toward the political standing of whites. Given that white political imaginaries are characterized by the "absence of political loss," any attempt to bring racial justice will be felt and seen as unacceptable and unfair (484). That is, loss of privilege that is based on the marginalization of non-whites will be sensed as a fundamental attack on whites' citizenship.

The key here is that the epistemic and subject-formation dimensions of world alienation prevent one from seeing reality because it occludes the fact of plurality. What world alienation in this sense does is orient oneself toward the world as if one were his sovereign or part of the sovereign class. “But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?” asks Du Bois. “Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” (1999 [1920], 18). He further asks, “now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this?” We are now in a position to say that the effect is a loss of reality. The result is the foreclosure of the plural display of appearances that the world has to offer. The result is an impoverished and hermetic (non-democratic) world.

## Concluding Thoughts: Common Sense, or How to Recover our Sense of Reality

How might we (re)orient ourselves towards sensing the fact of plurality and attune to its normative call? Arendt gives us an answer with her peculiar and sensorial conception of common sense as that which allows us to have a perceptual feel for the world we have in common. Arendtian common sense operates intrasubjectively and intersubjectively. It is intrasubjective because, as our sixth sense, it brings together our distinct and discrete sense organs into a comprehensive network that “fits into reality as a whole our five strictly individual senses” (Arendt 1977, 50). In keeping our “five senses together,” common sense guarantees “that it is the same object that I see, touch, taste, smell, and hear.” Common sense is intersubjective because it brings a community of sensers together. Parallel to how it gathers our incommensurably different senses around the same object, common sense also gathers incommensurably different sensers together by allowing us to communicate our sensations to others. Arendt explains that our sensations “lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance”

(1998[1958], 50). Common sense in this second operation stimulates our sensorium so that it fits "into a common world shared by others" (Arendt 1977, 50).

When it comes to both making sense out of our sensorial stimuli and making meaning out of events, we need a plurality of different perspectives speaking to each other *on* the object at hand to form the reality we grant to the object. The adequate functioning of our five senses and the role that spectators play in the space of appearance have a parallel structure in this sense. Just like our five individual senses need some sort of unification (i.e., common sense) that guarantees "that it is the same object that I see, touch, taste, smell, and hear," the perspective of each spectator depends "entirely on the object also appearing as such to others and being acknowledged by them" (Arendt 1977, 46). Arendt's discussion of the five senses, therefore, suggests an intra-subjective plurality that needs unifying but not in a sovereign way. Might this mean that there is an intersubjective agon of sensation that parallels the intrasubjective one?

I need to write another paper to answer this question. Suffice it to say for now that both the intrasubjective and intersubjective operations of common sense hinge on the notion of commonness. Only commonness—relation through difference—can serve as an in-between space. Only those things that we have in common—such as tables, poems, and libraries—can constellate into a world. Sameness, on the contrary, is the subsumption of difference. It is a process of homogenization. Arendt, therefore, sensorializes common sense because we can only get commonness in the phenomenal realm, a realm that is never a solely "interior" realm. The feeling of reality, the "worldly property" (Arendt 1977, 50) of common sense, can only be felt when we are in plurality. It cannot be felt in the solitude of our minds.

Common sense then is what bridges the gap between the fact of plurality and its normative call of equality and distinction. By cultivating a democratic common sense, we become aware not simply that our dokei-mois are limited, but that we need a plurality of dokei-mois if we are to constellate around common objects. A democratic common sense does not aim to generate some sort of idealized unanimity. Instead, it has the more modest goal of bringing to the foreground what we usually think of as being in the background. It attends to the sensorial and affective practices that condition our coimplication with the public things that furnish our common world. How do we sense the weave of the world? What strands fade from our view? How might we weave them differently?

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