

From *Animal Laborans* to *Animal Agora*: Hannah Arendt and the Political Turn in Animal Ethics

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The relevance of Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) work endures to this day. In contemporary interpretations, her work continues to be read and re-read, not only in its significance for political philosophy but also for the contribution it continues to make to ecological thinking. As we will see later, this is precisely what Vasterling does in her article, "The Human-Animal Distinction in Relation to World and Plurality" (Vasterling 2021).

Already in *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt describes *avant la lettre* that which we have come to understand today as the Anthropocene: "Human beings have begun to act into nature" (Arendt 1958, 231). That is to say, we have started to create natural processes that would have never come into existence without human intervention, the outcomes of which are unpredictable (see also Belcher and Schmidt 2021). As Arendt later states in *Between Past and Future*: "We have begun to act into nature as we used to act into history" (Arendt 1968, 58). In response to these observations, ecological readings of Arendt's work tend to focus, amongst others, on how the Earth, nature, and the world relate to one another.

At the time of writing, pressing global concern for the sustainability of our planet has become more prominent. This has led to arguments in favor of granting rights to nature – not only to animals but also to forests and rivers – in the fight against destruction and pollution. Nature here comes to be seen as a subject with an intrinsic value that can be represented in court (amongst others, see the United Nations' Harmony in Nature network). A growing awareness of the interconnectedness of human and non-human nature, of culture and nature, and the recognition that plants and animals, rather than passive beings, are entities that communicate with one another and the environment in myriad different ways, also forces humans to listen to the voices of other living beings.

According to many animal activists and eco-philosophers, granting animals so-called "negative rights," such as the right not to be mistreated

or abused, is an important step, yet one that ultimately does not go far enough (Meijer 2019). How might animals determine how they want to live *for themselves*? Moreover, considering the myriad possible relationships we can have with animals, how might we shape our relationships with animals in new ways? As Donna Haraway states in response to our living with dogs: we live with them “in the flesh” (Haraway 2003). According to various sources, dogs and humans have lived together for 15,000 years; even their immune systems are a product of co-evolution. So the question for Meijer and others is: how can animals gain an actual political voice? In their book, *Zoopolis* (2011), Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka argue not only for animal rights but also for animal citizenship.

In this contribution, I ask whether Arendt’s political-philosophical thinking can be a source of inspiration for the so-called “political turn” in animal ethics advocated by many animal activists and eco-philosophers. At first sight, such inspiration is not at all evident. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt states explicitly that political action is the sole preserve of human beings, as the ability to act is explicitly related to speaking in the presence of other people – something that also has the potential to reveal mutual differences. Implicitly, Arendt endorses Aristotle’s view that because animals cannot speak, they are unable to act politically. For Aristotle, humans alone are political animals, because they have language. The sound of a voice is, fundamentally, an expression of pain or pleasure, and therefore all living beings have a voice. Language is, according to Aristotle, intended to express that which is either just or unjust – concepts of which animals have no understanding.

Importantly, animals have now been shown to communicate in much more complex ways than was assumed at the time of Aristotle. Modern technology enables us to analyze sounds – such as differences in frequency and pitch – in ways that were previously inconceivable, and the same is true for the analysis of complex scent trails and body movements (Haraway 2008; Meijer 2019, 2020; Dufourcq 2021). Animals give meaning to each other, to humans, and to the environment. They play and collaborate with humans, and they can resist against oppressive situations imposed on them. Here you may think of dolphins who attack their trainers, a flock of sheep escaping, Australian magpies attacking cyclists whose race track crosses their breeding grounds, and geese who frequently enter into boundary disputes with humans. Yet, we can also deliberate with animals. A simple example would be the cat who indicates she would like to

go outside, but you do not want to keep opening and closing the door and so, the solution is a cat flap. However, the question remains, does this also make animals potential *political* actors?

Animal Laborans

In *The Human Condition*, the animal is addressed only in relation to the activity of labor. Labor corresponds to the biological process of the human body; it is an activity that is concerned with satisfying the body's basic, recurring needs. In classical antiquity, this activity was outsourced to women and slaves, thus liberating men to occupy the *agora* – the public space. According to Arendt, the slave was rightly referred to as an *animal laborans*: a member of the human species that had no freedom but instead was subject entirely to necessary activities. While humans are mortal beings, unlike animals, they are not merely members of their species. Rather, they can achieve a certain degree of immortality by creating lasting objects and by performing great deeds. Meanwhile, the immortality of animals as members of the species is guaranteed through procreation (see also Rossello 2022).

In the reception of her work, Arendt has been accused of demonstrating a certain contempt towards cyclical caring tasks and reproductive labor. While in the light of her description of the Greek polis, this is understandable, it is also unjustified. Indeed, the activity of labor is considered fundamental to existence: the human condition of labor is, so Arendt writes, *life itself*. In this sense, we are all *animal laborans*. However, according to Arendt, it is violent and unjustified to prevent part of humanity from participating in public life and to force people to live purely within the “private sphere of darkness” (see also van der Hoek 2000). While people have a certain capacity to transcend life processes, vitality can only be maintained if people also take it upon themselves to experience the pain and difficulty – the darkness – of life.

In addition to labor, Arendt distinguishes between two other fundamental activities, namely, work and action. The human condition of working means being in the world (worldliness). Work, as such, is concerned with the creation of lasting objects, from tools and cities to works of art.

All of these things make up our world, both connecting and separating people, in the same way a table both connects and separates those who are seated at it. The world is the public stage upon which humans come to act. And plurality is the condition of this action – there is no such thing as *the* human. Instead, humans appear in the world in both word and deed, in all their diversity. It is here that they engage in a mutual exchange of perspectives on the world. The political realm rises directly out of acting together, the “sharing of words and deeds” (Arendt 1958, 198). And power or empowerment is actualized where words are used “to disclose realities” and deeds are used “to establish relations and create new realities” (200). In this manner, action implies taking initiative.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that the condition of being in the world and the condition of plurality are specifically human. They are, however, placed under increasing pressure in the modern times. Already, since Plato, in an attempt to control the inherent unpredictability of the political realm of human affairs, political matters should be handled in the mode of fabrication – that is as an activity of work. However, this comes at the expense of plurality and spontaneity in the sense of taking initiatives and freedom. Subsequently, the activity of work, of fabricating things, has degenerated into a form of labor – a complicated function of the process of life itself. In other words, as mere *animal laborans*, humans no longer create a sustainable, communal world as a place of encounter but merely produce in order to consume, assisted by increasingly sophisticated technologies. Arendt argues that, as an activity, acting has moved from the political domain to the natural sciences – with unpredictable and irreversible consequences.

Rather than the world, life itself has become the highest good. In this way, Arendt argues that man may be on the point of developing “into that animal species from which, since Darwin, he imagines he has come” (322). She considers such a Darwinian reduction of the human to a biological organism as a great danger. However, perhaps it is also here that we can conceive of an opportunity for these times. As many as a hundred animal species are becoming extinct each day, and humans themselves will, in time, be threatened with extinction. The growing awareness of the physical vulnerability and interdependence of all that lives forces us to take new initiatives. Arendt’s later work may serve as inspiration here.

The Value of the Surface

In the first part of *The Life of the Mind, Thinking* (1978), Arendt employs an understanding of the world that not only encompasses artificial objects that have been created by humans but also all natural things. The latter all 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” (Arendt 1978, 19). These creatures, and hence also animals, are themselves appearances and, therefore, “not just in the world, they are *of the world*, and this precisely because they are subjects and objects – perceiving and being perceived – at the same time” (20). Hence, this world is relational, with a wide variety of perspectives and actors. To live means to be filled with an “urge to self-display.” “Living things make their appearance like actors on a stage set for them” (21). Not only does this act of appearing differ between species, but it is also different for each individual creature. Hence, plurality is no longer merely conceived as a human condition. Rather, as Arendt writes, it constitutes the law of the earth itself. It is this point that Vasterling emphasizes in her aforementioned article (Vasterling 2021).

Arendt here both refers to, and is in agreement with, the work of the biologist Adolf Portmann, about whom she spoke in her *Denktagebuch 1950-1973* as early as the 1960s (Arendt 2002). Portmann has argued that what appears in terms of animal life is not there for the sake of the life process, in service of self-preservation, or the preservation of the species, but rather, the opposite is true: it is self-display “*that makes these functions meaningful*” (Arendt 1978, 27, emphasis in original). The enormous diversity of animal and plant life, and the richness of self-display, cannot be explained in terms of Darwinian functionality. That which appears cannot be reduced to some inner process that lurks beneath. This implies that animals in their appearances can no longer be reduced to mere examples of a given species, subject only to the biological process of life. Here, too, there is individuation and distinction.

Arendt subsequently describes the distinction between animals and humans in terms of, respectively, self-display – something that is shared by all living creatures – and self-presentation, which is the sole preserve of humans. Whereas animals can only show themselves without self-reflection, to some extent, humans are able to choose how they want to appear to others. For example, any *display* of anger, as opposed to the anger that

I feel, already contains a reflection of that anger. What becomes manifest, Arendt argues, is never the emotion itself, but rather, what we think about it, and thinking is a linguistic, metaphorical activity. In other words, humans present themselves through words and deeds, and, to some extent, this always involves choice. Thus, self-presentation is not possible without a certain degree of self-consciousness, and this ability is inherent in the reflective nature of mental activities. Surely, this reflection transcends consciousness as such.

Arendt here explicitly invokes Aristotle's idea that distinction and individuation occur through speech. As animals do not possess symbolic language, they express their feelings through unarticulated sounds and thus lack individuation and distinction. Thus, we have now returned to the distinction proposed in *The Human Condition*: plurality is a human condition. In her article, "The Human-Animal Distinction in Relation to World and Plurality," Vasterling rightly points out an inconsistency in Arendt's work: while there is nothing wrong with the distinction between humans and animals in terms of self-presentation and self-display, Arendt's explanation thereof – namely, her appeal to Aristotle – is unjustified. After all, numerous studies have since revealed animals communicate both with each other and with their environment and express themselves in complex ways that far exceed the idea of mere unarticulated sound. Moreover, it has now become evident that also, within a given species, individual differences exist. Hence, self-display as a form of embodied uniqueness not only refers to how the species expresses itself but also encompasses individual differences. One chicken or cow is not the same as the next.

Nevertheless, argues Vasterling, the distinction between self-display and self-presentation is still useful. Indeed, self-presentation involves a deliberate choice of how you want to appear to others. Here, the presentation of the self is the reflective goal, as expressed in life stories and biographies, and such reflection is linked to the mastery of symbolic language. Self-display results in distinction and individuation, without individuation being the preconceived goal. Self-presentation as a choice is only possible *up to a point*, as Arendt argues, precisely because self-display as embodied uniqueness is always inherently part of it.

This statement does not contradict Arendt's claim that plurality is the law of the earth. According to Vasterling, this means that animals should also be able to differentiate and individualize. In my view, the latter argu-

ment is entirely concurrent with the defenders of the political turn in animal ethics. Notably, this political turn is not defensible from the perspective of Arendt's thinking itself, and the topic also resides beyond the scope of Vasterling's article. However, when we place it alongside the thinking of Donna Haraway and Sue Donaldson, for example, it can not only serve to enrich and deepen our thoughts on the encounter between people and animals but also on the appearance of animals in the public space.

Space of Appearance and Encounter Value

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt does not differentiate between self-presentation and self-display, where the space of appearance is concerned. In acting and speaking, humans reveal their unique personal identity. This disclosure of *who* you are, as opposed to *what* you are – the qualities and characteristics that you may have in common with others, and that you can choose to either reveal or conceal – appears in everything you do. It is, however, most clearly visible when people come together with the explicit aim to act in the public sphere. This identity – who you are – does not precede acting and speaking, but only comes into being through acting and speaking; it is performative (see also Van der Hoek 2000). This disclosure “can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose” (Arendt 1958, 179). Rather, it comes into being in relation to others and is incorporated into the network of human relations and narratives. Of course, even though every action has its own motives and purposes, simultaneously, the action itself cannot be reduced to these. Indeed, even the most purposeful action involves a form of self-disclosure that lies beyond one's own control, and hence, the action always has consequences that go beyond the motives and goals of the actor. Moreover, because of factors, such as pre-existing networks and the many conflicting intentions that may also come into play, the action almost never reaches its goal. In other words, intentions and choices do not determine the meaning of the action. Instead, its meaning resides in the network of narratives that together constitute the communal world.

The concept of the world – or, more precisely, that of “reworlding” (Haraway 2003, 2008, 2016) – also plays an important role in the work of Donna Haraway. Hers is a worldliness that also encompasses earth and nature, more strongly and explicitly than for Arendt. Indeed, Haraway describes the world as a “compost pile,” in which animals, plants, humans,

technologies, and all other critters interact (Haraway 2016). Her thinking – often in the form of telling experiences and stories – is intended to also provide the world with alternatives. The world consists of the interactions between countless “companion species” in a web of interdependencies and entanglements. While companion species may make one think primarily of domesticated animals, the concept is much broader and more heterogeneous. Here, you may think of bees, rice, bacteria, etc. The word “companion” stems from *cum panis*, which literally means “with bread.” We are all companions, in the sense that we are dining companions at the same dinner table. Whereas Arendt uses the table as a metaphor for the world, for Haraway, that table is also explicitly a *dining* table. In this way, Haraway acknowledges the fact that all living beings must eat and that eating always necessarily implies killing.

Haraway argues that the existence or identity of any living being is the result of the interaction and intersection of many forces: “To be one is always to become with many” (Haraway 2008, 4). The relation between species as companions is a *becoming with*. The question is: how is this *becoming with* a practice of “becoming worldly”? For Haraway, the answer can be found in adding to Marx’s notions of labor and work, value and exchange value, another important value – that of encounter. This non-reproductive value is crucial to the making of concrete companions: the encounters involve “*subjects* of different biological species” (46). The encounter value implies a reflection on (the rethinking of) instrumental relationships between human and non-human animals (see also Van der Hoek 2018). In doing so, Haraway asks for a different form of engagement, namely: how can instrumental relationships become less painful and freer for all parties concerned? I think that the encounter value fits well with Arendt’s recognition of the self-disclosure that is inherent in all actions by human and non-human animals. Precisely in appearing to each other, as Arendt describes it, the encounter value becomes manifest.

There are many types of relationships of use between human and non-human animals. For example, you may think of dogs that are charged with tasks such as guarding, herding livestock, tracking, and therapeutic support. According to Haraway, these instrumental relationships are not necessarily the same as a lack of freedom, or violence. There are degrees of unfreedom and violence. Instead, reworlding, in terms of companion species, is about destabilizing hierarchical relationships of use. Precisely here lies its transformative power.

This transformation requires deliberation, not only *about*, but also *with* animals. Proponents of the political turn in animal ethics want to consider animals as citizens who participate in and shape the world. Among others, this requires that animals are free to make clear their preferences and to improve their relationships and communication with other human and non-human animals. For example, dogs that must always walk on a leash are severely restricted in this respect. In order to improve freedom of movement and thus animal agency, humans should literally grant other animals more space and make infrastructure safer. Consider also the experiments with mobile milking robots to be operated with cows on pasture, allowing cows to decide for themselves when they want to be milked by walking over to the robot. A new relationship between farmers and cows comes into being. They learn from each other and the subjectivities of farmers and cows are being redefined (see Driessen 2014). Beavers, for example, can also help humans avoid the desiccation of the land, as their dams naturally retain water. Geese are often shot or chased off for causing inconvenience – this while, Meijer suggests, it is indeed perfectly possible to deliberate with geese, for example by planting (or by precisely not planting) crops that they find appealing (Meijer 2019, chapter 7).

Sue Donaldson argues in favor of an “animal agora” in which “human and animal co-citizens can engage one another in spontaneous, unpredictable encounters, spaces that they can reshape together” (Donaldson 2020, 713). Here, she imagines the design of a new kind of *commons*: spaces to which all kinds of animals have access, such as parks, squares, and the redesign of the landscape. As Rossello also concludes: “Donaldson’s animal agora substantially overlaps with Arendt’s idea of a public sphere conceived as a shared world of appearances” (Rossello 2022, 222).

Hence, we can certainly find inspiration in Arendt’s political-philosophical thinking to consider the “political turn” in animal ethics. Often, the political participation of animals is legitimized by the idea that animals are very similar to humans, or precisely rejected because they are not. Both perspectives, however, are clearly anthropocentric, and this is something that indeed can never be avoided. Opponents argue, for example, that animals have no self-consciousness or real intentions – something that is also being refuted by new research. However, in Arendt’s view, as described above, this issue may in fact not be that relevant. After all, as Arendt has argued in *The Human Condition*, it is not intentions that

determine the meaning of actions. Rather, their meaning resides in the narratives and the new relationships that emerge from them.

Those opposed to the idea of the political agency of animals also argue that animals are only able to articulate their own preferences and interests. They are unable of, what Arendt would call, “representative thinking” (Arendt 1968). For Arendt, this ability to represent the possible and actual positions and perspectives of others is a crucial aspect of political judgment. Precisely by using the power of our imagination, we are able to place our own troubles at a distance and bring closer that which is otherwise far away. Whether or not animals are truly capable of this: here lies an important task for human animals when it comes to the political turn in animal ethics. From the increasing awareness of shared bodily vulnerability – after all, humans are always also *animal laborans* – and the increasing awareness of mutual interdependence, it is imperative that humans broaden their perspectives, learning to listen better to animals and exercise their ability to respond (literally, their response-ability).

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