Natality, Event, Revolution: The Political Phenomenology of Hannah Arendt

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The conceptual framework of *The Human Condition* — arguably Arendt’s most original achievement — helps shed light on phenomenology itself, viewed under the lens of the tripartite distinction between labour, work, and action. First, phenomenological labour is endless, to the extent that it is imbricated with the inexhaustible variety of the lifeworld and with the non-formal exigencies of givenness, just as physical “labour, caught in the cyclical movement of the body’s life process, has neither beginning nor end”.¹ It reflects the materiality of phenomenological practice that draws on what is given (to perception, for instance) to make sense of its givenness. There is no glimmer of freedom in its purely reactive response to what is, incapable of questioning the *how*, as opposed to the *what*, of givenness.

Second, phenomenology, conceived as work, is precisely this “fabrication” of sense marked by “a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end,” (HC 143) which corresponds to the culmination of empty intentionality in fulfilled intuitions. This is, so to speak, the detective work of establishing connections between the merely intended and the givenness of what was intended, the work of drawing up definite correlations between the various aspects of the phenomenological *nous*. Teleological through and through, it harbors a great dose of ideality, having extracted acts of consciousness from their temporal horizons, severed connections among them, and transplanted noetic and noematic correlates onto transcendental grounds. The absolutizing of intentionality confers a greater degree of freedom on the phenomenological enterprise, while the bittersweet fruit of this daring is transcendental idealism, often forgetful of the very materiality it unearthed in its labours.

Finally, phenomenology as action has a variety of beginnings but no definite end, because it incessantly and critically undermines, de-idealizes, and de-formalizes itself. Shadowing the possibilities of the ultimately non-accomplishable, though still finite, human existence, phenomenology *qua* action is inherently critical and self-critical, which is why its legacy to us is a ruptured series of introductions, a discipline in crisis, one that freely thrives on incomplete beginnings and drastic self-revisions. There is no shame in remaining a novice, as far as rigorous phenomenological investigations are concerned, for, assuming this posture over and over again, we follow the exigencies of existence and practically embody the critical injunction to strive to the things themselves. Tellingly, inserted into Arendt’s conceptual scheme, this last instantiation of phenomenology would be consonant with the political
principle of a self-disrupting multiplicity, the condition of human plurality and natality, and the *locus essendi* of critical political phenomenology.

Each of the three perspectives presupposes a distinct notion of truth. The first is still beholden to the veracity of the natural attitude, unable to suspend the actuality of the given nor to contemplate its possibilities. The true is what there is in the “now” of perception, in whatever stands out from the horizon of potentially perceivable things and falls into the spotlight of my sense-bestowing gaze. The truth of phenomenological work, conversely, pivots on the traditional idea of *adequatio*, albeit not of *rei et intellectus* (the thing and intellect) but of the cognizing intention and its cognized object, as well as of intentionality and lived experience as such. It ceases to draw on the actuality of the given thanks to operating *epoché* in the transcendental field of pure phenomenology. Now, phenomenology as action adheres to the existential conception of truth, which it finds in itself, that is to say, in its possibilities, including those of dismantling and recommencing its own way of thinking. If to act is to begin and if, further, the beginning “is not the beginning of something out of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself” (HC 177), then the truth of action lies in the beginners themselves, in their self-critical and “highly self-destructive”2 practice of phenomenology and of thinking in general. Neither subjectivism nor solipsism, this figure of truth invests the actor with the power to fashion her thought in the image of existence, according to which, regardless of our biological age we are all beginners.

The truth ingrained in the event of beginning marshals a series of political implications.3 Although Arendt famously claimed that she was not a philosopher — let alone a phenomenologist — but a political theorist, her views on beginnings inaugurate one of the few political phenomenologies, deserving of the name. It is well known that the accent she placed on natality, or, in technical terms, thrownness, was meant as an Augustinian-inspired4 counterweight to the prominence of projection in Heidegger’s philosophy. But exactly how do beginnings function in Arendtian thought? The plural form in this question is not an accident; in addition to considering beginnings in the context of human multiplicities, Arendt conceptually doubles the very term “beginning” into what turn out to be two very dissimilar notions. Only one of these is identical to the fact of natality, namely, the first beginning that necessarily implies the “supreme event” of our appearance within the world, from which we disappear in the event of our death (HC 97). Such appearing is not an act, even if it is already replete with phenomenological overtones; it lies absolutely outside the sphere of our conscious control, in what Lévinas used to call “the immemorial past,” simultaneously disturbing and escaping the subject’s sphere of representation. It would be futile to apprehend this beginning directly, which is why, supported by language and action, we must start again, begin *after* beginning, with an unavoidable delay. Far from a straightforward
actualization of the merely potential first beginning (Arendt regards natality as “the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” [HC 9]), the second beginning is a response to the first, from a temporal and conceptual distance to it, the response that can never respond enough to the unrepresentable condition it addresses. Any worthwhile human project will, henceforth, be mediated through a dia-logue between the two beginnings, rid of the delusion that it can gain full mastery over the “human condition” par excellence, i.e., natality.

On the most obvious interpretative surface, the second beginning is equivalent to political action, the institution of polis as “the organization of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together” and, therefore, as “the space of appearance” (HC 198). The condition for the appearing of what appears in this space is speech, logos, just as in classical phenomenology phenomena can only appear thanks to being spoken about (I see what I speak of). But it is a logos that is not at all incompatible with contention, critique, disagreement, and nonviolent clashes of ideas, because it is fractured into a multiplicity of more or less disparate beginnings. Even within one human being logos is irreparably split against itself; the inner monologue, whereby, in solitude, I speak to myself is already a dialogue across the minimal distance between this I and myself, constituting the “primary condition of thought.” A variation on the Husserlian construction of the subject by means of hearing-oneself-speak, political logos holds together, without synthesizing, many beginnings, both within and outside myself. In fact, it transforms the very idea of appearance from a merely physical-biological coming of the newborn into the world to the public and almost theatrical making of one’s appearance on the political scene in the second beginning. Of course, the physicality of the newly born human body is already public, as is any adumbrated phenomenon accessible from a variety of viewpoints, especially because it is already caught up in the web of expectations and logoi of others — parents, family, state authorities, and so on. But the publicness of natality is insufficient to eliminate the difference between the two beginnings: being born is being made to appear in the world, while acting is making one’s appearance and, thus, to a certain extent, politically making the world into a “space of appearance.”

Not only does the political coming-into-being contain numerous references to phenomenology, but also, and more significantly, Husserl’s phenomenological project betrays, on this reading, its undeniably political meaning. Phenomenology, much like modern thought in general, is intent on making a new beginning, such that “a reconstituting of the world by consciousness” it calls for “would amount to a second creation in the sense that through this reconstitution the world would lose its contingent character, which is to say its character of reality, and it would no longer appear to man as a world given, but as one created by him.” The world recreated on the basis of
transcendental consciousness would be self-given: in this Husserl’s Ideas assumes an essentially political meaning as the philosophical instantiation of the second beginning (“a second creation”) which Arendt normally associates with action and the realm of politics. The question is to what extent this transformation retains a critical edge: to what extent it preserves the awareness (though not the memory or any other conscious representation) of the first beginning and the challenge it poses to all human, and especially humanist, illusions of full mastery and control.

Arendt’s response to this question is markedly ambivalent. Husserl’s “arrogant modesty” lies in his “transforming … alien Being into consciousness” by means of turning the human being into “the creator of the world and of himself” (arrogance), whilst trying “to comfort us about the very point in which all of modern philosophy can take no comfort whatsoever, namely, that man is forced to affirm a Being that he did not create and that is alien to his very nature” (modesty) (EU 166, 167). To be fair, this transformation is never complete, such that its incompleteness prompts the unending activity of reduction, bracketing, de-sedimentation. Self-givenness does not and cannot succeed in fully eradicating the problem of givenness, unless it uncritically covers it over. The materiality of phenomenological labour puts the brakes on the ideality of its work in the maturity of its action. Unforgivably naïve is the thought that the first beginning could be “transformed” into the second without leaving behind an obstinate remainder, or in Freudian terms, that unconscious material could be entirely elevated to the stratum of conscious representations. The second beginning — be it political, phenomenological, or both at once — must be placed within its proper fragile limits, delineated by the edges of the first beginning, on the one hand, and by the sudden collapse of logos in philosophical speechless wonder, violence, or totalitarianism, on the other. The work of this delimitation will comprise the bulk of critical political phenomenology.

The above is not the sole corrective Arendt addresses to Husserlian phenomenology. Her general, somewhat masked, rejoinders follow the vein of Heidegger’s existential preoccupations with the forever-incomplete course of human life. From a critical perspective, they add up to a concerted attempt at de-idealizing human existence, liberated from the constraints of teleology and uprooted from the transcendental ground which is alien to it. Much in Arendt’s writings on the problem of freedom may be understood with reference to these efforts, revealing that political experience is without evidence, because the intentionality that underpins it necessarily lacks fulfilment. This, perhaps, is the weightiest reason behind the opposition of political thought to the fetish of instrumentality, an attitude oriented exclusively toward the accomplishment of a predetermined end. When it comes to action, it would be tragic to aspire “to the same fulfilment of intention that is the sign of mastership in … intercourse with natural, material things” (PP 58). There is no fulfilment of social or
political intentionality, because there is no such unified intentionality in the first place aside from a patchwork of new beginnings, or, at best, loosely bound common projects. *Body politic* is not analogous to a great person, such as the Leviathan, with a coherent experience of its own. It is in this context that Arendt mocks Plato’s lament in *The Laws* to the effect that sense organs (eyes, ears, hands) are “by nature private” and are not synthesizable into, for instance, the eye of the *polis* (PP 61). Our biological bodies divide us as much as they bring us together, but, in any event, they do not yield a collective experience, wherein the intentionality of all would attain fulfilment. (These are the effects of political facticity, the predication of politics on irreducible human plurality.) As a consequence of this positive and eventful inaccomplishment, a space of freedom opens up, where the ideal teleologies of phenomenology no longer work and, moreover, where the *work of phenomenology* is simply inapplicable.

The unpredictability of action, which forges a new beginning (PP 58f) and renders infinite the temporal movement of intentionality right within the world of human finitude, is the form of political experience without evidence. In this, Arendt stays faithful to the alternative phenomenological tradition of Heidegger, who showed that the intentionality of being-toward-death had no end even though it rotated in the sphere of mortality and finitude, and she reaches conclusions formally analogous to those of Lévinas, who substituted the figure of the other for death. Neither my death nor the other nor, for that matter, an outcome of action, as opposed to work, is given in the manner of phenomenological evidence: the impossibility of claiming for oneself the full or fulfilled experience of these liminal events is self-evident. The critique of Husserlian phenomenology becomes interchangeable with a critique of sovereignty, of subjectivity fully in control of itself and of its world, transcendentally insured against unpredictable empirical accidents and deviations from the chosen course of action. The thought of beginning, which is also the beginning of thought, removes, precisely, all such assurances, to the extent that it preserves the qualitative difference between the three modalities of time, irreducible to variations on the present.\(^{11}\) The temporalizing event of what happens between “birth” and “will” supplants the perceptual foundations of phenomenology.

Along with the foundationalism of the present, Arendt purges from her political theory the idea of foundations as such. When Husserl distinguished the founded from the founding layers of thought and experience, he succumbed to the kind of de-historicization of phenomenology that some deemed to be liberating. Whereas Hegelian- and Marxist-leaning critical theorists deplore this feature of phenomenology, Arendt welcomes the return to the things themselves in all their materiality as a break with the speculative view of human history (EU 166). But the break comes with a price tag: the idea of foundation has covered over the much more unruly and unpredictable capacity to begin. Foundation is an event that impedes the coming to pass of future events. Were Husserl to
indulge in a healthy dose of historical speculation, as Arendt herself does, he 
would have discovered that “foundation” was a Roman invention, which put the 
discrete act of beginning in the service of permanence, continuity, and, finally, 
authority. An expression of freedom (to begin and to persevere within the 
beginning) for the Roman spirit, the foundation admits of no ruptures and 
forbids new beginnings; it allows nothing else but a continuous derivation of 
history as the unfolding of the foundation on its own turf, in what, to the 
founders and all those faithful to them, appears as the unending glorious present. 
A critique of foundationalism aims, in turn, at those political arrangements that, 
having had radical beginnings, fell victim to the pathos of endurance and 
truncated human action, referring to the capacity to make a new beginning (OR 
85) — e.g., the French and Russian revolutions that deteriorated into the reign 
of Terror — and, surreptitiously, at the phenomenological “principle of 
principles,” the primacy of presentive intuitions, levelling inner time 
consciousness and, paradoxically, militating against the eidetic primacy of pure 
possibilities. Beginnings, conversely, are the foundations of foundation, those 
that un-found and un-ground it, rupturing the ideal continuity of the tradition 
and revitalizing the capacity to being anew. If the reader permits me one final 
piece of historical speculation (this time, related to personal history or 
biography), Arendt’s near romanticizing attachment to beginnings could be 
seen as the survivor’s response to a catastrophe, after which one is forced to start 
again in the absence of foundations, hopelessly shattered in the course of the 
war. Unlike the foundation that idolizes and aspires to immortalize a single and 
singularly accomplished event, the beginning anticipates an infinite multiplicity 
of events coextensive with the plurality of human existence and dotted with the 
rifts and clefts of crises. 

When Arendt notes how “Rome’s sanctification of foundation … [was] a 
unique event” (PP 54), she relates this both to the source of its political authority 
and to the thought-event, whereby it definitively enshrined Greece as the cradle 
of philosophical tradition. A philosophy and a politics that seek to furnish 
foundations for themselves are self-sanctifying, whereas the critique of 
foundations, a rigorous anti-foundationalism in theory and political practice, 
has a profaning function. The doubling up of the beginning in natality, 
unavailable for conscious appropriation, and in action participates in the critique 
of foundationalism: the multiplication and superimposition of grounds is 
peculiarly abyssal, as deconstruction has, on countless occasions, demonstrated. 
Neither the unrepresentable past of natality nor the unpredictable future of 
action is in a position to ground politics and thought, let alone to re-construct 
the world with transcendental certainty. To make a beginning means 
significantly more than to act; it is, above all, to be a beginning, to be suspended 
in the abyss between past and future, as the title of Arendt’s book intimate, and, 
therefore, to be free. Existential grounds ought to be strictly distinguished
from substantive ones, so that ontological self-grounding, “being” a beginning, would come into its own through a rigorous critique of foundationalism. Those who are new beginnings, that is, those who exist — in the existential sense of the term — find themselves in a perpetual crisis coextensive with their existence and undiminished by the application of transcendental *epoché*. Existence does not sanctify itself; on the contrary, it desacralizes itself, enacts an ongoing critique of its own possibilities.

Despite these correctives to the thought of Husserl, Arendt discovers in it a wealth of critical resources for the understanding of politics, given that, in her rendition, phenomenology is restyled into a critique of violence and of totalitarianism. Both phenomena and *logos* are crucial for the success of this critique. *Logos*, coded in terms of speech, acknowledges human plurality and marks the beginning of politics, absent from acts of violence. Phenomena, inherently admitting a multiplicity of modes of being accessed and interpreted, are narrowed down to a single perspective under totalitarianism. If violence and totalitarianism jointly result in the destruction of the world — if not of the world’s very worldhood — this is because they raze the conditions of possibility for speech, for phenomenality, and for making new beginnings. Those subjected to their deleterious effects are born into a worldless and eventless world, one where the first beginning of natality is not doubled in action and where phenomenology has no rightful place of its own.

In the Arendtian universe, speech must assert itself against an overwhelming background of mute violence. Those who speak bring into being a shared world, an ontological *res publica* that flourishes between the speakers. At any moment, however, waves of unspeakable violence may flood the islands of speech: similar to theories of social contract, mindful of the possibility that the “mortal” political state is subject to dissolution and a return to the state of nature, Arendt’s political thought is attuned to the danger of leaving the space of appearance and falling back into a mute confrontation. What is at stake in this potential deterioration is not so much the collective organization of the state as the phenomenological world, diminished by violence — for instance, that emanating from torture — which negates speech. “Only sheer violence is mute” (HC 26) and, therefore, it does not afford us access to phenomena, let alone a world shared with others. Phenomenology as the speaking out of phenomena is always going to be on the other side of the barricades, fighting against everything that frustrates the givenness of the world and whatever is given in or through it. The *logos* of phenomenology will be synonymous with the critique of violence, allied, in its essentially Greek provenance, with the *polis*, which Arendt honors as “the most talkative of bodies politic” (HC 26). In phenomenological terms, it was the most world-creating political entity, although it brought about the death of Socrates, for reasons Arendt deems hardly accidental.
For the Greeks, “thought and action were considered to be coeval and
coequal, of the same rank and the same kind; and this originally meant...that
most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is
indeed transacted in words ...” (HC 26). The first beginning in human natality
holds the promise of speech, but that promise will not be made good until the
second beginning in action announces itself. The precariousness of beginning —
thus, its eventfulness — hinges on the uncertainty that the transition from
natality to action would really come to pass and, if it does happen, that mute
violence would not despoil action and speech. The strength of *logos* is also its
weakness: weaving its web out of itself, without reliance on any externally
imposed foundations, it has nothing to fall back on but itself and, therefore, no
effective defense against violence. Existence, understood existentially, and its
accouterments, including speech, are ontically and, above all, ontologically
vulnerable.

But the Greek beginning, too, is ominously divided against itself, thrust into
an originary crisis. The opposing sides in this division are politics and
philosophy. The philosophical enterprise begins (and ends) in the state of
“speechless wonder,” which “cannot be related in words because it is too
general for words” (PP 33), and, in this, it contravenes the most basic
constitution of the *polis*. By virtue of their very being, philosophers are excluded
from the political space of appearance. Instead of acting in the world in which
they appeared through biological birth, philosophers reinvent natality as such
and, born again into the world of Ideas, initially lose both vision and everyday
speech. They are the existential negation of everything that makes the *polis*
what it is, which is why, to defend itself, the *polis* eliminates the *Ur-
philosopher*, Socrates. So strikingly does speechless wonder resemble, at the
conceptual level, the apolitical muteness of violence that it is conflated,
wholesale, with the annihilation of *logos*.

The wager of philosophical wonder is that, although it brings plentiful
contributions to the fight against the dogmatism of readymade opinions (PP
36), its suspension of *logos*, however temporary, runs the risk of emasculating
the critical impulse, as well. Phenomenology, conversely, does not flirt with
wonder bordering on mysticism, misguided attacks on the notion of eidetic
intuitions notwithstanding. Its “ideas” do not reside in the otherworldly realm
above phenomena; rather, they are extracted from the phenomena themselves.
Phenomenology is philosophy that exceeds its origin and scope, a philosophy
of plural, potentially infinite, modes of accessing phenomena included in the
things themselves. It is a political philosophy, not inasmuch as its content and
themes touch upon politics but inasmuch as it shares its most vital
underpinnings with the political workings of human pluralities.

A further, more nuanced dividing line cuts across the thought of Socrates
and Plato, as Arendt argues in *The Promise of Politics*. Succinctly put,
according to her reconstruction of that fateful moment of ancient thought, Socrates, not Plato, was a purely political philosopher, who recognized that “there were as many different logoi as there are men” (PP 19); who was, by the same token, much more attentive to the phenomena themselves and to endless varieties of doxa that grant us access to phenomena; and who never had enough of speaking to others. Since action is possible there where multiple, dispersed beginnings are not gathered into the One, logos, too, is originally splintered into many competing logoi operating under the guise of doxic knowledges. With this train of argumentation, presumably inspired by Socrates, Arendt exposes not only the political consequences but also the inherently political meaning of Husserl’s doxic critique of epistēmē and the attendant vindication of everyday “mereness.” If politics does not permit us to distinguish between being and appearance (OR 88) — this, by the way, would not be a symptom for the failure of critique but, to the contrary, for the honing of critical thinking militantly resisting the metaphysical machinations of hypostatizing something or someone separated from the world here-below — and if, moreover, in the public realm, “appearance … constitutes reality” (HC 50), then phenomenology is the most suitable home for political thought and action.

Plato must have recognized the danger of speechless wonder and, upon recognizing it, resorted to fastidiously crafted analogies, mediations, and reflections of eidetic light in the method he called “dialectic.” The claim that he “proposed to prolong indefinitely the speechless wonder which is at the beginning and end of philosophy” (PP 36) is a crude exaggeration. After all, if visible things, or everyday phenomena, are themselves the pale reflections and signs of Ideas, from which they are not altogether divorced, then doxic knowledge and colloquial logoi also cannot be dismissed in favor of speechless wonder’s “truth.” This is not to mention that prolonging indefinitely that condition which defines the beginning and the end of philosophy would have prevented Plato from making the leap to the second beginning: from ideal natality — rebirth from existence in the cave into the world of Ideas — to ideal action, laying the grounds for a philosophical community.

Throughout her writings, Arendt invests logos with the responsibility analogous to that of the sovereign in Schmittian political philosophy: it must act as the kath‘echon, or the restrainer, deferring the possibility of apocalyptic collapse that may befall, at any time, the instituted order and prompt the disintegration of the world in violence. To Schmitt, ultimately conservative sovereign violence is an acceptable measure meant to prevent such world-dissolution. Arendt, on the other hand, advocates the renaissance of action that, through speech, would be ready to make a fresh start and re-create the world. This, then, is the sense in which she opposes power to violence: “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions
but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (HC 200). An echo of Husserl’s critique of mere words, bloße Worte, this statement envisions critically amplified logoi, still in touch with the phenomena they do not veil but “disclose.” That power which resists violence belongs to phenomenological critique.

The phenomenological genealogy of Arendt’s thought thwarts, in the first instance, its liberal appropriation for the purpose of defending contemporary parliamentary democracies. Against such misreading, we ought to be reminded how liberal parliamentarism spawns words that are empty and that veil intentions, instead of disclosing the realities of the economic unevenness they perpetuate. They are thoroughly divorced from action and it is no secret that they would not have been allotted the space of utterance, were they potent enough to inaugurate a new beginning. Preventing the achievement of our appearance, they throw us back onto the nakedness of our first beginning — the fragility and precariousness of natality — cut off from the second, world-creating beginning of action. In the interrupted dialogue of the two beginnings, natality thus remains without an answer, in a silence already heavy with violence.

The axiom that says, “violence, as distinguished from power, is mute; violence begins where speech ends” (EU 308), lays a critical limit, internal to phenomenology itself, and so relevant to the difficult relation of phenomena and logos. A mute phenomenon is not a phenomenon. Nothing can be made to appear, nothing will present itself, if it is silently forced to give itself to sight, or is made available for manipulation. Wordless violence targets, besides a vast majority of humans who are denied a meaningful voice on the political stage, other living beings, be they animals or plants. The instrumentalizing character of violence denies these beings their space of appearance, robs them of their phenomenality. It would certainly be absurd to expect animals and plants to speak in human voices, but does this absurdity imply that mute violence is the destiny of our relation to them? If so, then these living beings have not yet properly appeared and cannot appear at all. And yet, is it so far-fetched to imagine human speech that would not be indifferent to them and that would treat them as though they were partners in a conversation of the living? Would it be out of the question to account for their unique possibilities and ways of expression, spatial and otherwise, outlining the contours of their “speech” without speaking? To act with plants and animals, rather than to labour or work on them? Couldn’t their natality (unlike mortality, no less authentic than ours) appeal to ours and indicate a series of pathmarks to a qualitatively new beginning, an open-ended action of instituting the broadest res publica yet? Arendt precludes this possibility, insofar as she, largely despite her own way of thinking, subsumes natality under the sway of the human relation to death, the
knowledge that our beginning is the beginning of the end. But, assuming that natality did not share in the somber finitude of mortality, its “joyful” finitude could play a considerable role in the critical undermining of anthropocentrism. Walter Benjamin’s thesis on human language as a translation of the language of things, heralding the redemption of nature, would then spell out the secret meaning of the Arendtian phenomenology of nonviolence.

The prologue to The Human Condition rehashes yet another Husserlian critique of logos, one directed against formalized and mathematized natural sciences that, having come into contact with existing cultural attitudes, urge us to “adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful” (HC 4). Arendt’s criticism of modern scientific logos carries Husserl’s theses to their most radical conclusions: the chief effects of the digitalized “world where speech has lost its power” are the growing worldlessness and disempowerment of all those who rotate in its orbit (HC 4). The crisis of the sciences is, at bottom, a political crisis, in that it robs us of our capacity to act, to make a new beginning, to respond to the problem of natality, to be free, finally. Without meaningful speech, the world is not a world; politics, inebriated with raw force, is drained of power; phenomena cease to appear, to give themselves as what they are. Pure violence reigns in the ideal reconstruction of things as the material expressions of mathematical formulae and codes, while the search for meaning is replaced with the postulation of objective truths independent of the spoken logos. Intellectual work yields objective research outcomes (for instance, having decoded yet another segment of an organism’s DNA sequence) that leave no breathing space for the non-actualizable, essentially incomplete thinking indistinguishable from action. The quest for meaning, which used to be “at the same time prompted and frustrated by our inability to originate meaning” (EU 313), becomes, in and of itself, meaningless.

But logos is not alone in bearing the brunt of political violence; phenomenality, likewise, falls victim to the onslaught of totalitarianism. Incomprehensible to those who put their trust in the “objective approach” to reality and its facts — the approach independent of the political condition under which we access (or fail to access) phenomena — the decline of phenomenality under totalitarianism has to do with the dismissal of perspectival knowledge and the subsequent melting of dispersed beginnings into a single standpoint. Rather than “new beginnings that had never before appeared and been seen in the world” (PP 59), the subjects of totalitarianism are interchangeable, and, in keeping with this dark political ideal, so are their perspectives on the world. Phenomena continue to be given in the mode of adumbration befitting extended spatial entities which we can access from a virtual infinity of perspectives. But if the scatter of beginnings, characteristic of human plurality, is welded into one, then the wealth of adumbrations will no longer matter and will undergo a de facto ontological narrowing down under the pressure of political circumstances.
Once again, phenomenology emerges as a champion of anti-totalitarian thought and action, using the criteria postulated by Arendt herself. A method attentive to the distinct modes of givenness of what appears, including the multiple adumbrations of phenomena, it accommodates, without much effort, a critique of totalitarianism. “…we know from experience,” writes Arendt in *The Promise of Politics*, “that no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which corresponds to his standpoint in the world and is determined by it” (PP 128). An ensemble of adumbrations emerges before us thanks to a free sharing of the world in and through speech (PP 129), the action that effectively gives us the world in its ontological richness. And where action is incapacitated, givenness itself is not given. Taken together, these two ideas flesh out the sense of phenomenology as the co-belonging of adumbrated phenomena and *logos* that amplifies their dimensions in the space of appearance where what is spoken about co-appears with the speakers themselves. Phenomenology, thus, precipitates an increase of being, admitting infinite modes of givenness, perspectival adumbrations, and a plurality of speakers into its midst.

Not so in the case of totalitarianism. Here, as in the fantasy of a purely scientific grasp of what is, *logos* falls silent and the task of beginning is forsaken. The dialogue between the two beginnings — between natality and action — is broken off because the distance between and within the speakers, who can no longer even be alone with themselves, gets erased, as they are gathered into a unified whole. As these and other rifts disappear, so does the space of appearance as such, which is why totalitarianism arrests the “development of experience.” Its rule is not only violence but also non-givenness, the absolute withdrawal of the world. Nothing could be less consistent with phenomenology than that. The crisis of beginnings, felt in their factual dispersion and in the uncertain transition from natality to action, is thrown into a much greater crisis of distances crossed, rifts mended, and the evaporating power of critique, of distinguishing, of discerning, of judging, in the archaic sense of *krinein*. Breaking with the vicious cycle of the crisis of/in crisis, the promise of politics that keeps these in-between spaces open (and that, through them, traffics the entire world) is the promise of phenomenology, always prepared to accommodate a critique of totalitarianism.

It is worth noting that the critical model lurking in the background of Arendt’s thought has much in common with the classical Enlightenment insistence on the enlargement of the public sphere. For Kant, the public use of reason was a duty predicated not on formal-epistemological grounds but on political-ontological ones: it was the obverse of his proscription of secrecy — for instance, in the essay on “Perpetual Peace” — that shrouded the capriciousness of absolutist rule emanating from a numinous will, a source of
power withdrawn from the world. (Political theology ensured the illicit smuggling of secretive political authority into the list of metaphysical problems, such as freedom and the nature of God, outside the limits of reason.) The publicness of power, its phenomenality — if not utter transparency: the hope and the normative ideal of the Enlightenment — would forestall precisely this assault on reason.

Are we to infer from this that Arendt’s political criticisms are of one piece with those of the Enlightenment? Such an interpretation would be at odds with the existentially vibrant space of appearance, where political subjects are coming to light, without attaining anything like full transparency. In contrast to the uniformity of Enlightenment rationality, their appearing is made possible in the refracted medium of multiple *logoi* corresponding to the plurality of doxic modes of accessing the world. Phenomenology is a critique of pure appearance as much as it is a shunning of absolute nonappearance; the ground of the political extends between these two idealities of pure presence and pure absence. 31

When Arendt contends that “the greatest that man can achieve is his own appearance” (HC 208), she does not violate this simple political phenomenological principle, provided that the achievement she invokes is of the order of possibility, and, as such, belongs to experience without fulfillment, without either presence or representation. The achievement of one’s appearance, existentially understood, suffers the most under totalitarian regimes that bring to a naught the phenomenality of power along with meaningful speech and action. In the secrecy of monarchical absolutism and royal court intrigues, one at least knew whereto power had withdrawn, whereas totalitarianism thrives on a constant displacement of power, such that even its withdrawal and nonappearance are withdrawn and unapparent. The self-dissimulation of totalitarian power is not comparable to Heidegger’s ontological and eventful “giving withdrawal,” which, in keeping with the principles of phenomenology, still left something behind: traces of being and the world as such. Totalitarian nonphenomenality is purely negative: its “consistent arbitrariness” robs human beings of the capacity to act (OT 433). Besides withholding its own appearance, the elusive seat of totalitarian power annihilates the space of appearance, halts the process of human self-phenomenalization in the second beginning, and, with this, undercuts the very possibility of possibility. While violence wipes out the world-creating effects of *logos*, totalitarianism dispenses with political *phenomena*, properly so called.

Methodologically, the non-self-givenness of totalitarianism poses a seemingly irresolvable problem before phenomenological modes of investigation. If one is supposed to follow the things themselves, if political thought at its best discloses the articulations of the political phenomena themselves and “remains bound to what appears in the domain of human
affairs” (OR 9), then one soon discovers that, in the case of totalitarianism, there is nothing to follow because “the phenomenon, which we try — and must try — to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding” (EU 310). Its self-encryption makes it particularly immune to critique, because the “object” to be criticized is too amorphous to be placed within the limits of either logos or appearance. But this crisis of logos and understanding, which, in the course of tackling totalitarianism, finds itself bereft of anything “given” is, in its turn, productive of a more discerning critique that necessitates a thoroughgoing self-critique: “…what is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment” (EU 318). The non-givenness of totalitarian “phenomena” shifts the spotlight onto the subjects of understanding, who have nothing to fall back on, save for a critique of their method. It reveals the Gordian knot binding the understanding of totalitarianism’s origins and the understanding of this very understanding, the requisite search for new beginnings in the self-critique of the subjects of knowledge: “Even though we have lost the yardsticks by which to measure, … a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories …” (EU 321). In other words, the point is to bring the “origins within ourselves” into contact with the origins of the withdrawn political phenomenon, in a short circuit of the event where the promise (and the end) of the crisis would signal the beginning of critique.

Direct resistance to totalitarianism is unlikely to achieve its goal, because one cannot act if one does not know where and how to make a start and because what we resist keeps veiling itself and relocating elsewhere (OT 398ff). The “permanent instability” of totalitarian movements (OT 391) that eschew rule-bound delegation of authority is meant to safeguard their vitality in a parody of existence, both negating political action and emulating its non-actualizable, existential potential. In an illusion of constant self-reduction to the terminus ad quem, which is the numinous will of the Leader, any visible power structure may be miraculously endowed with this supreme authority and, just as suddenly, be divested of it. Actual institutions are epiphenomenal, as opposed to the true source of political life — this will, which engulfs and negates action and speech proper to human multiplicities. A flurry of unexpected changes, attributable to the arbitrariness of the noumenal entity, covers over the totalitarian obstruction of everything conducive to event of politics. So much so that the totalitarian Leader perverts Plato’s insight in The Laws, to the effect that “only the beginning (archê) is entitled to rule (archein)” (HC 224), into “only the ruler is entitled to begin.” The beginning no longer legitimates rulership, but the ruler determines every new beginning, “isolated against others by his force” (HC 189), itself devoid of logos or speech. “Isolated” by its own force, which is not converted into power by means of political phenomenality and logos,
totalitarian leadership erodes the continuity required for the relation of leading-and-following to take root. Its permanent crisis fills every lacuna still hospitable to the emergence of critique, or to critique as the onto-phenomenological emergence of a vital political order.

To a certain extent, the legacy of the totalitarian destruction of political speech and phenomena is still with us. In 1954, in a lecture delivered at the American Political Science Association’s conference, when Arendt stated that “[u]nder present circumstances, true action, namely, the beginning of something new, seems possible only in revolutions” (EU 437), she obliquely invited her audience to rethink the meaning of revolution. No longer referring to the overthrow of the entire existing order, the new sense of the word is at once more modest and more ambitious than its classical counterpart. It is more modest because, due to the non-givenness of totalitarian phenomena, it is pointless to search for the locus of “real power” that, if struck, would lead to the domino effect of the system’s collapse. In fact, power is largely absent from the world governed by speechless violence and deprived of its worldhood. Revolutionary action must strive, instead, to stimulate a proliferation of new beginnings, the exceptional spaces of appearance that will punctuate and rupture the seamlessness of the whole. But it is also more ambitious because it is not satisfied with the actualization of its goals in a mere replacement of one regime with another. Oriented by existential possibilities, such action invites a lasting critique of violence and totalitarianism in all their guises. Creating new spaces of appearance, it reaffirms, time and again, the ties that bind logos and phenomena, without proclaiming their final identity, which would have resulted in the stillness of an apolitical tautology.

Political phenomenological critique becomes creative, giving rise to a new terrain of thought and, above all, action, in the same manner as Husserlian critique was productive of the entire fields of transcendental consciousness and eidetic phenomenology. The literally constitutional, constitution-making role of revolutions is analogous to the objectivation of sensations or the constitution of objectivity in the acts of consciousness. The sense of the world, including the political pluriverse, is inseparable from who we are and what we do: if revolutions recall us to beginnings, then they bring us back to ourselves, to the beginnings that we are, re-activating the conditions of possibility for our very subjectivity, not to mention for living and acting together. Every revolution is a revolutionizing of the subject, and every subject — a potential revolution in the making between the two beginnings of natality and action.

Considered through the prism of constitutive political subjectivity, revolution is an essentially modern event, the event of modernity as such, and, by the same token, an event of or in phenomenology. Rather than appeal to the obscure mystery of political beginnings, the act of revolutionary foundation finally occurs “in broad daylight to be witnessed by all” (OR 197). Its sheer
phenomenality is consistent with the modern emphasis on publicness and transparency, even if the revolutionary tradition itself, *qua* tradition, often cloaks in myth the groundbreaking events it collects into a simple unity. Unless it happens “in broad daylight,” revolution will not have enough resources to launch a critique of authoritarian political foundations, withdrawn from sight and from understanding. Hence, for Arendt, a totalitarian revolution would be an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, which lumps together, unmediated, the withdrawal and the exhibition of power. Whether or not the political foundation is coming to appearance is the critical test, conducted under the aegis of phenomenology, for the revolutionary nature of the founding event.

To put it differently, in revolutions, there is no place for a noumenal, metaphysical entity or will, which would determine, from a hidden standpoint above or behind the world here-below, the fateful events surrounding a new beginning. Much in the same way that phenomenology refutes the existence of the thing-in-itself as the transcendental cause of phenomena, Arendt’s theory of revolutions denies their orchestration by the nonapparent absolute, immune to critical scrutiny and immanently historical analysis alike. “…it is futile,” she writes in *On Revolution*, “to search for an absolute to break the vicious circle in which all beginning is inevitably caught, because this ‘absolute’ lies in the very act of beginning itself” (OR 196). The eventful transcendence of revolutionary beginnings takes place within historical immanence; the constitution of meaning and objectivity transpires in the flux of psychic life. The inclusion of the absolute “in the very act of beginning” does not set this act apart from whatever might follow in its trail but exposes its own conditions of possibility, akin to that modernist artwork which presents, as its content, the materials that made it possible.

The revelatory function of revolutionary action, exhibiting the beginning in the light of phenomenality, challenges the prevailing view on the violent origination of the political. Indeed, for Arendt’s phenomenological theory to work, the making-appear of demythologized revolutionary beginnings must coincide with the putting into words (performance in *logoi*) of the new political order. In legends, including the early modern conjectures of the state of nature, “no beginning could be made without using violence, without violating,” and it is in a transgression of this unspoken law that “the first sentence of St. John, ‘In the beginning was the Word’” had the air of salvation (OR 10). The *logos* of *muthos*, which still teetered on the verge of speechless wonder, was hospitable to a violent negation of speech. We ought to hear the complaint Arendt voices against mythical beginnings phenomenologically: displaying the beginning without excessive obscurity means letting it be and appear in the medium of *logos*, as it does in the declaration, “We, the people…” And yet, the violent residuum does not fade completely, if only because, in its modern instantiation, it is sublimated into the symbolic sphere.  

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between political phenomena and *logos* open — the problem is how to convert its deadening, worldless hiatus into world-giving critique.

One hint for a possible solution has to do with Arendt’s description of the realm of violence as pervaded with unpredictability. Revolutionary events, too, are arbitrary, insofar as the beginning is not determined by anything outside itself, and it is this arbitrariness that serves as the invitation to violence. Nevertheless, “what saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium* and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity...makes its appearance in the world” (OR 205). What anchors political phenomenological critique is the principle of the beginning, immanent to the beginning itself, against which its “appearance in the world,” that is to say, phenomenality, is to be measured. But, in order to maintain together the *principium* and the principle, jointly responsible for the (non-Hegelian) appearance of the absolute in the world, the articulations of *logos*, in the shape of a tradition emanating from and carrying forth the revolutionary beginning, are indispensable. The event must be suspended between mechanistic predictability, on the one hand, and pure arbitrariness, on the other, where “between” neither refers to a middle ground nor appeals to moderation. No doubt, the revolutionary tradition will be in need of a constant desedimentation, seeking to reactivate our capacity to begin. Its critique, incessantly transmuting arbitrariness into the principle of freedom, is at the core of the political relation between *logos* and phenomena: “As such, the principle inspires the deeds that are to follow and remains apparent as long as the action lasts” (OR 205). But action does not last forever. The phenomenal appearance of the revolutionary principle is finite, temporally circumscribed by its duration, that is, by the deeds and words (the *logoi*) that follow the beginning both in fidelity and in strict succession, which never really departs from what was begun. To institutionalize this beginning is to violate the temporality of the political “things themselves”; to accept its finitude is to acquiesce to the periodic — or, perhaps, the final and definitive — “death” of the political. The drama of Arendt’s political phenomenology is that it is but a periphrastic reiteration of Samuel Beckett’s famous words: “we must begin, we cannot begin, we will begin”

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References


3. Anne O’Byrne recognizes the phenomenological underpinnings of natality, all the while classifying them with a *historical*, rather than political, phenomenology [Natality and Finitude (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 90].

5. Emphasis mine.

6. Julia Kristeva’s take is directly opposed to the critical phenomenological reading of Arendt. Kristeva ignores the fracturing of *logos* even at the heart of the “self” and, instead, attributes to it a unifying function, so that the Arendtian *Selbst* “welds together the phenomenon and the logos.” [Hannah Arendt. Trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 173.]


8. The difference between the two beginnings—roughly, the material and the ideal—goes a long way to assuage the worries of Adriana Cavarero, for whom “Arendt does not highlight the concept of birth as a coming from the mother’s womb, but accepts the Greek meaning of birth as a coming from nothing.” [In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Re-Writing of Ancient Philosophy (New York: Polity, 1995), 6.]


11. This is probably what Elisabeth Young-Bruehl means when she write that “[f]or Arendt, temporality, far from having to be overcome for man to be, is the source of possibility for action, in which his being is intensified.” [Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World. Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 495.]


16. Arendt constructs this argumentative chain in *Between Past and Future*, 167. Cf., also, EU 322.

17. Cf. the chapter on Arendt in Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology*, as well as Dana Villa (“Introduction: The Development of Arendt’s Political Thought.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*. Ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)) who concludes that Arendt’s “fears concerning the way this carefully built up world might be swamped by the forces of cultural barbarism…” (5)


19. Noam Chomsky’s “universal grammar” attests to this fact.


21. *Doxa* designates, for Arendt, the way in which the world opens up for us (PP 23), the way things look or appear from a certain position in the world (PP 29) and, hence, something of *eidos*—not only the “Idea” but also the look or the image of things.


24. Two brief quotations from Hannah Arendt, “On Violence” [in Crisis of the Republic (New York & London: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1972)] are in order here. 1) “…to act is the human answer to the condition of natality” (179); and 2) “glorifications of violence are caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world.” (180)


26. This is in line with the suggestion made by Michel Serres in his recent Temps des Crises (Paris: Le Pommier, 2009).


28. This is what Jacques Rancière will later have in mind when he introduces the term “aesthetic regime” into his political philosophy.


30. Hence, it is questionable whether one can talk about Arendt’s “phenomenology of totalitarianism,” as Seyla Benhabib does, even allowing for the negative modification of phenomenological concepts in totalitarian “worldlessness” and “loneliness.” Cf. Seyla Benhabib, The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt (Oxford & Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 69.

31. The “invisible visibility” of the political resonates with the insights of the early Schmitt, especially in his Roman Catholicism and the Political Form (1923).


33. Of course, Arendt did not subscribe to Husserl’s transcendental method in toto. But neither did she swap transcendental philosophy for an uncritical “naturalization of thought.” Her rejection of speechless wonder does not automatically entail a dismissal of exceptional and quasi-miraculous events such as revolution and, indeed, thinking itself. It is, therefore, blatantly wrong to assert that in a “reverse normalization of Husserl’s hyperbolic stance, Arendt has naturalized philosophizing itself. Philosophy is natural to us, like breathing.” [Max Deutscher, Judgment After Arendt (Hampshire and Burlington, 2007), 15.]

34. “beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself.” (Arendt, Human Condition, 177)


36. The coming-to-light of political phenomenality is not a passage between “the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds,” into which Anthony Causcardi [“Communication and Transformation: Aesthetics and Politics in Kant and Arendt,” in Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics. Eds. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997)] transforms it under the influence of a Kantian reading of Arendt (110). A mediation between noumena and phenomena would, strictly speaking, correspond to a reconciliation of totalitarianism and radical democracy.

37. This is the point of Jacques Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” (1967), as well as, more pertinently, of his essay “Declarations of Independence” (1986).
