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The human-animal distinction in relation to world and plurality

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Arendt's approach to the human-animal distinction shows a clear change from *The Human Condition* to *The Life of the Mind*. The two most consequential markers of that change are the concepts of world and plurality. In *The Human Condition* Arendt tends to distinguish world as the artificial dwelling place of human beings from nature as the realm of living beings. Even though humans and animals are both living beings and creatures of nature, the implication is that making and having a world is what characterizes humans rather than animals. In *The Life of the Mind* however, Arendt writes: "living beings, men and animals, are not just in the world, they are *of the world*"(Arendt 1978, 20; italics in the original). This seems to indicate a shift in her concept of world. With respect to plurality, the change is more evident. Whereas Arendt, in *The Human Condition,* introduces plurality as one of the human conditions and proceeds to define it as a specifically human achievement, she declares on the first page of the first chapter of *The Life of the Mind* that plurality is "the law of the earth", thereby extending plurality to all living creatures (Arendt 1978, 19).[1] Whereas the human-animal distinction in *The Human Condition* seems rather dichotomous and essentializing, these indications from *The Life of the Mind* seem to point in the direction of a loosening of the distinction.

What is the relevance of this change? In this article I want to argue for a twofold answer to this question. First, I want to show how and why Arendt came to change her mind on the human-animal distinction. I will argue that the transformation of the human-animal distinction and the concepts of world and plurality in *The Life of the Mind* is part and parcel of the project to deconstruct metaphysical fallacies and to introduce a phenomenological ontology. Deconstruction and phenomenology have deep roots in Arendt's work but they are hardly ever explicitly discussed and elaborated. The Introduction and first chapter of *The Life of the Mind* are an exception. Without using the terms deconstruction and phenomenology, Arendt provides an extensive discussion of both. A striking feature of the phenomenological ontology Arendt introduces, is the role of animals. There is not only much discussion of animals but from the many references in the text it is clear that Arendt's discussion is heavily influenced by Adolf Portmann's phenomenology of animals. These three factors together, i.e. the deconstruction of metaphysical fallacies, the introduction of a phenomenological ontology and the effect of

1 See for instance this passage in *The Human Condition*: "In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings"(Arendt 1958, 176).

Portmann's phenomenology of animals, made a reconsideration of the human-animal distinction necessary, and with it, the adjustment of the concepts of world and plurality.

Second, with this article I want to join the growing reception of Arendt as a thinker who offers important resources to ecological thought. The literature in this area is varied. Authors show how Arendt's concept of action provides a resource to break "climate change paralysis" and empower people to act (Hargis 2016). They also take up Arendt's discussion, in *The Human Condition*, of acting into nature as a prescient account of what is now called the Anthropocene (Robinson 2018, Belcher and Schmidt 2021). More germane to the topic of this article is literature focusing on the phenomenological concept of nature (Donohoe 2017, Gillette 2020), the concept of earth and the earth-world distinction (Chapman 2007, Ott 2009, Bowring 2014, Kelly 2015). Despite dichotomous or dualist overtones of the earth-world distinction in Arendt (Ott 2009, Bowring 2014), authors also emphasize the interconnectedness of earth and world. Donohoe, in particular, argues that Arendt's phenomenology of nature is neither anthropocentric nor objectifying but, rather, involves an intertwinement of humans and animals who both share the earth (Donohoe 2017, 182). Though suggestive, to speak of the intertwinement of humans and animals is still quite vague and general, a vagueness and generality that can be concretized and specified, I will argue, by paying close attention to Arendt's discussion of humans and animals in the first chapter of *The Life of the Mind*.

I will start the argument with a discussion of the question in how far the human-animal distinction in *The Human Condition* is essentializing, followed by a short account of the metaphysical fallacies Arendt deconstructs in *The Life of the Mind* in order to introduce a phenomenological ontology in which animals play an important role. With the three issues in place that prime the transformation, I will then elucidate the ways in which the concepts of world and plurality and human-animal distinction are adapted. I will show that Arendt's adaptation of the human-animal distinction is inconsistent and argue for a more consistent adaptation of the distinction, based on Portmann's work.

How essentialist is the human-animal distinction in *The Human Condition*?

Before trying to answer the question in the head of this section, it is important to first investigate Arendt's view of essentialism. Though she never raised nor discussed the question of essentialism in any explicit or unequivocal terms, it is safe to say that her concept of the human in *The Human Condition* is not essentialist and maybe even anti-essentialist. Arendt's concept of human plurality, expressed in the often quoted line that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt 1958, 7), implies that she "rejects any substantive notion of a universal human nature" (Klusmeyer 2018, 355). That is, she rejects what usually is taken as the basis and standard of an essentialist conception of the human, namely a common human nature as the defining characteristic of what makes human beings human. Already in her first book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt declares that "human 'nature' is only 'human' insofar as it opens up to man the

possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man" (Arendt 1951, 455). In chapter 5 of *The Human Condition* this observation is elaborated in more explicit terms. Without denying that human beings have features in common and, therefore, share to a certain extent a common nature, she emphasizes that it is not *what* humans share but *who* they are or, rather, become in the course of their lives, that makes them human. Not a common and generic human nature consisting of biological and social features humans share, but a plurality of unique beings is for Arendt the defining character of human beings. Human plurality is realized in speech and action, making for similar but unique beings who differentiate themselves and are differentiated by and from others through their words and deeds which make up their biographies. While humans are alike in what they are, they are unique in who they are. In Arendt, the question what makes humans human can, strictly speaking, only be answered by collecting the billions of biographies of humans who have lived, but even if that were an achievable endeavour, it would not answer the question definitively. For the answer cannot but remain open-ended as long as there are, and will be human beings who shape their lives in words and deeds, resulting in, as yet, unforeseeable biographies.

In what way does human plurality preempt an essentialist conception of the human? Doesn't it simply replace human nature as determination of the essence of the human? To argue along these lines would constitute an ungenerous reading of Arendt's work. If she had ever explicitly discussed essentialism, her approach would probably have been closer to the one in cultural and gender studies than to any standard approach in contemporary philosophy.[2] In the critical approach of cultural and gender studies essentialism is considered not only a flaw because it homogenizes what is not homogenous, mostly by attributing certain defining characteristics; it is also considered to be a bad thing because it excludes and marginalizes those who don't appear to possess the defining characteristics (Phillips 2010). Take for instance the well-known example of reason which, in the tradition of modern western philosophy, is established as the defining characteristic of human beings and which, by the same token, excludes and marginalizes those who are deemed to be devoid of reason (animals) or lacking in reason (women and colored peoples).[3]

Arendt would have underwritten the critique of essentialism as homogenizing what is not homogenous for, arguably, that is the point of the famous line that men, and not Man,

2 She would certainly not have occupied herself with the kind of conceptual work that is typical of analytical philosophy, for example Charlotte Witt's conceptual clarification of essentialism in *The Metaphysics of Gender* (Witt 2011). Nor would she, in this case, have used the historical and interpretational approach of continental philosophy. Though her approach is, in general, quite close to the one of continental philosophy, she would have considered the question of essence as a metaphysical question typically taken up by philosophers like Heidegger. As she was well acquainted with his work, she would have known that his work abounds in the discussion of essence, for example the recurring discussion of the essence of truth and being in e.g. "Vom Wesen der Wahrheit" (Heidegger 1930/1978).

3 Kant's work is a paradigmatic example. In his anthropology he explicitly opposes human beings as rational beings and persons to "things, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes." (Kant 2006, 15). And in his Grounding of a Metaphysics of Morals he argues that only men are capable of true morality, that is morality based on the dictates of duty, whereas women act on the basis of inclinations and emotions (cf. Kant 1981, 11-12).

inhabit the world. Whether she would have confirmed the exclusionary and marginalizing effects of essentialism is more of an open question. The application of this aspect of the critique of essentialism to Arendt's notion of the human has an ambiguous result. On the one hand, one can argue that plurality replaces reason as the defining characteristic of the human, but without homogenizing nor excluding or marginalizing human beings. For common to all human beings, plurality is a potential that, if realized, differentiates human beings, turning them into unique individuals.[4] On the other hand, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt seems to endorse a human-animal distinction that is exclusionary and homogenizing. Though both are creatures of nature who inhabit the earth, Arendt, in this book, separates humans and animals by attributing world and plurality solely to humans.[5] By excluding animals from plurality and worldliness, Arendt homogenizes animals as undifferentiated and worldless living beings. For this reason, one can argue that the human-animal distinction is dichotomous and essentializes animals.

A phenomenological ontology

The move from the context of *The Human Condition* to the one of *The Life of the Mind* involves quite dramatic changes. In the introduction and the first chapter of the first volume, the reader who is acquainted with Arendt's previous work, and in particular *The Human Condition*, cannot but notice a strikingly new preoccupation with metaphysical fallacies and with animal life.[6] In this section I will provide a succinct discussion of Arendt's project of deconstruction of "'metaphysical fallacies'". (Arendt 1978, 12; quotations marks in the original).[7] Partly as a result of the deconstruction she introduces a phenomenological ontology and a new approach to the human-animal difference.

With respect to her deconstruction project Arendt remarks: "I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in

4 It, of course, makes a difference whether one achieves or doesn't achieve plurality but the difference is not a lack in human beings but in the world. Those who live under conditions of totalitarian terror, slavery, severe repression and exclusion from the public realm, are seriously impeded in the achievement of plurality.

5 See for instance this description of the separation of human existence and animal life in the Prologue of *The Human Condition*: "The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms."(Arendt 1958, 2) As to plurality, apart from the fact that it is introduced as human condition, it is clear that Arendt, throughout *The Human Condition*, reserves its potential exclusively to humans for only human life, in contrast to animal life, can become uniquely individuated existence. This is made evident by, for instance, the fact that the term existence is consistently used to refer to human life and never to animal life. Whereas the former is capable of individual uniqueness, animal life is life of the species, without individuation and subjected to the life process. See for instance Arendt 1958, 322.

6 *The Life of the Mind* was planned as a trilogy on thinking, willing and judging. Arendt finished the first two volumes of the trilogy, on thinking and willing, that were published after her death (1975) in 1978.

7 The use of the term fallacies, even when it is between quotation marks, is rather unfortunate because, as Arendt explains further on in the text, the fallacies do not refer to simple flaws in reasoning "as if philosophers throughout the centuries had been, for reasons unknown, just a bit too stupid to discover the elementary flaws in their arguments." (Arendt 1978a, 45) Instead they reflect the lived experience of "professional thinkers" (Arendt 1978, 3), containing "the only clues we have to what thinking means to those who engage in it" (Arendt 1978, 12). I therefore prefer to speak of metaphysical constructions instead of metaphysical fallacies.

Greece until today." (Arendt 1978, 212) Like Heidegger and Derrida, Arendt engages with the philosophical tradition in order to pick out metaphysical constructions which are built to safeguard a metaphysical truth. The metaphysical truth the fallacies help to protect and safeguard is the Platonic two-worlds model which opposes a world of (true) being to a world of (mere) appearance. According to Arendt, the two-worlds model is the foundational metaphysical construction to which the other fallacies are joined in order to consolidate and secure the foundation. The fallacies Arendt discusses are solipsism, the subordination of common sense, and the equation of truth and meaning.[8]

Central to Arendt's deconstruction is the thesis that, starting with Plato, the valuation of contemplative life as far superior to active life has distorted the experience and conceptions of not only the active life but also the life of the mind. Analogous to the deconstruction, in *The Human Condition*, of the conception of politics in terms of making (*poièsis*) that brings to light politics as pluralist action (*praxis*), Arendt, in the first volume of *The Life of Mind*, embarks on a deconstruction of the two-worlds model and the metaphysical fallacies that support and consolidate it; a deconstruction that reveals thinking as a dialogical quest for meaning instead of a solipsist contemplation of truth.[9] As Plato's famous cave analogy makes clear, (philosophical) thinking conceived of as a solipsist contemplation of truth cannot escape from the "intramural warfare" with common sense (Arendt 1978, 10). Coming back into the cave, the cave dwellers are skeptical, to say the least, about the truth the philosopher claims to have seen. So, from Plato to Heidegger, philosophers turn the tables on common sense: it is not the solitary philosopher but, on the contrary, the cave dwellers, the anonymous masses with their opinions who are deluded.

Though fascinating, this is not the place to elaborate the details of the deconstruction.[10] I will continue with what is the most important point in the context of this article. On the first page of the first chapter of *The Life of the Mind* Arendt states: "In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*."(Arendt 1978, 19; italics in the original). In stating that being and appearing coincide, Arendt proposes a phenomenological ontology that replaces the metaphysical opposition of the world of (true) being and the world of (mere) appearance. The concrete import of this phenomenological ontology is made clear on the same page: "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."(Arendt 1978, 19; italics in the original). The understanding of being in terms of appearing entails the acknowledgment of sentient creatures for there can be no appearing without

8 Cf. the Introduction of *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978, p. 3-16)

9 See chapter one, section eight of the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* for Arendt's discussion of the distinction between truth and meaning. Whereas thinking is a quest for meaning, cognition is a quest for truth. (Arendt 1978, 53-65).

10 Cf. Taminiaux (1997) for an elaborate account of the deconstruction.

perceivers. Appearing is relational: appearing is always appearing *to*. Appearing entails recipients that in some way or other can pick up on appearances.

As sentient creatures humans and animals are living beings who perceive appearances and who appear to each other. Having established this, Arendt draws out four important implications. First, that living beings, "men and animals, are 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."(Arendt 1978, 20) Second, "to be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure." (Arendt 1978, 20) Third, "In contrast to the inorganic thereness of lifeless matter, living beings are not mere appearances. To be alive means to be possessed by an urge to self-display which answers the fact of one's own appearingness. Living things *make their appearance* like actors on a stage set for them."(Arendt 1987, 21) Fourth, "The stage is common to all who are alive, but it *seems* different to each species, different also to each individual specimen. (…) Seeming corresponds to the fact that every appearance, its identity notwithstanding, is perceived by a plurality of spectators."(Arendt 1978, 21).

On first sight, these four implications appear to abolish any distinction between animals and humans by generalizing what used to be exclusively human features to include sentient creatures. The first one generalizes worldliness, the second one suggests that not only human life but all sentient life is not completely absorbed in the cyclical life process, as *The Human Condition* submits, in that there is the relative permanence of world.[11] The third one suggests that not only human beings engaging in action but all sentient creatures are actors on a stage and the fourth implication concludes, consistent with the previous ones, that sentient life is plural and, hence, capable of individuation. However, one should not be misled by this apparent generalization for Arendt proceeds with a careful nuancing of the concepts of world and plurality.[12]

The recalibration of world

In *The Life of the Mind* not only human beings but animals as well are "of the world". This means that the world has become the phenomenal space, or in terms of *The Human Condition*, the space of appearances, of *all* living creatures and all of them make their appearance in the world like actors on a stage. *The Human Condition* presents world and earth as different conditions of human existence, and contrasts the artifice of a man-made world to the realm of nature. Earth and nature seem to overlap as "the limited space for

11 Note for instance this observation in *The Human Condition*: "Nature and the cyclical movement into which she forces all living things know neither birth nor death as we understand them. The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences, but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart. Birth and death presuppose a world which is not in constant movement, but whose durability and relative permanence make appearance and disappearance possible, which existed before any one individual appeared into it and will survive his eventual departure."(Arendt 1958, 96-7).

12 It is important to pay attention to the transformation of the concepts of world and plurality for without it one is easily deceived by the apparent generalization of features attributed to human beings in *The Human Condition* to living nature, see for instance Jeremy Arnold (2016).

the movement of men and the general condition of organic life", while world is the unnatural realm carved out from both (Arendt 1958, 52). In *The Life of the Mind*, however, world includes nature and overlaps with earth. World has become the earthly space of appearance for humans and animals.

This extension of world raises the question what happens with the artificial-natural distinction and the related temporal distinction between the stability of the artificial world and the unceasing cyclical movement of nature. In *The Human Condition*, this artificial-natural distinction substantiates the argument that "it is only within the human world that nature's cyclical movement manifests itself as growth and decay."(Arendt 1958, 97) More precisely, the question is whether, in the context of *The Life of Mind*, it is still only human beings who are aware of the artificial-natural distinction and the related temporal distinction, especially in view of the second implication, referenced above, which suggests a permanent world for all sentient life. In order to answer this question we need to take a closer look at what Arendt has to say about world in relation to animals.

World is the earthly space of appearance of all sentient life but at the same time it encompasses a range of specific worlds "for every animal species lives in a world of its own" depending on its sense organs and bodily features (Arendt 1978, 20). Since humans are an animal species as well, endowed with specific sense organs and bodily features, we, humans, also live in a world of our own in which we move at a certain pace, perceive in a certain way and are (in)capable of certain things. The species-specific worlds are, in differing ways, part of and open to the encompassing earthly space of appearances. More precisely, the species-specific worlds constitute distinctive ranges of perceptual perspectives on, and of possibilities of interaction with the earthly space of appearances. Think for instance of the distinctive range of perceptual perspectives on, and interaction with the world that obtains for birds, fishes and humans. The question is what, in this context, the permanence of the world means and refers to. If "to be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure", then the sense of permanence cannot be the same as in *The Human Condition* where the stable permanence of the human world is contrasted with the perpetual cycles of nature. The very contrast of human world and nature, in *The Human Condition*, provides the possibility, for humans and only for humans, of perceiving both the stability of the world and the perpetual cycles of nature. When world and nature overlap, as they do in *The Life of the Mind*, the contrast vanishes, raising the question how humans and other living beings are able to perceive the temporal distinction between a permanent world and the incessant cycles of nature. How can living beings be aware at all of the permanence of the earthly space of appearances that simultaneously is pervaded by the cycles of nature?

Arendt answers the question as follows: "To be alive means to live in a world that preceded one's own arrival and will survive one's own departure. On this level of sheer being alive, appearance and disappearance, as they follow upon each other, are the primordial events, which as such mark out time, the time span between birth and death. The finite life span allotted to each living creature determines not merely its life expectancy but also its time experience; it provides the secret prototype for all time measurements no matter how far these then may transcend the allotted life span into past and future. Thus, the lived experience of the length of a year changes radically throughout our life.(…) We all know how the years revolve quicker and quicker as we get older (…) Against this clock, inherent in living beings who are born and die, stands 'objective' time, according to which the length of a year never changes. This is the time of the world and its underlying assumption is (…) that the world has neither beginning nor end, an assumption that seems only natural for beings who always come into a world that preceded them and will survive them."(Arendt 1978, 21-21). I have quoted this passage *in extenso* in order to show how Arendt attributes the ability to experience and measure time to living creatures in general. The argument for this ability draws on a new contrast, replacing the natural-artificial distinction, namely the contrast between the living creature's own transient life span, stretching between its appearance on the stage of the world and its disappearance from that stage, and the permanence of world as the earthly space of appearances that precedes every creature's appearance on, and disappearance from the stage of the world.

Instead of the artificial-natural distinction Arendt relies on a new distinction between the transient time of individual life and its inherent time measurement on the one hand, and the permanence or quasi timelessness of an abiding earthly space of appearance. This new distinction points to another new feature, introduced in *The Life of the Mind*, namely the individuation of organic nature. Instead of speaking of nature in generic terms, as she did in *The Human Condition*, Arendt now speaks of individual living creatures. The new feature of individuation supports and strengthens the explanation of the possibility, for animals, to perceive a temporal distinction between cyclical or transient time and permanence. From the perspective of individual living beings, say a herd of elephants, the appearance of offspring and the dying of companions may be experienced as cyclical time or, at least, as time passing, against the backdrop of a permanent or relatively unchanging earthly space of appearance.[13] From this it does not necessarily follow that, for animals as well, birth and death are more than natural occurrences, but the awareness of offspring appearing and companions disappearing does entail passive individuation, that is, the identification of other living beings as distinctive individuals.

13 Of all animals certainly mammals are aware of offspring, since they have to take care of them in order for offspring to survive. It is less clear whether mammals are always aware of death but for instance elephants are aware of disease and death of their companions. See for example Sharma et al 2020.

The changes introduced by *The Life of the Mind* do not require that the artificial-natural distinction should be abandoned entirely. If that were the case, Arendt's conception of human beings would change drastically and the animal-human distinction would probably collapse. There is, however, no evidence for such a collapse in *The Life of the Mind*. But with the broadening of the concept of world the reference of artificial-natural distinction seems to have changed as well. In *The Human Condition* the distinction refers to a world that is always and thoroughly artificial, in contrast to the naturalness of nature. In *The Life of the Mind* however, the artificial-natural distinction, instead of corresponding to the world-nature contrast, has become internal to the world. Both humans and animals use nature's resources to make and shape a species specific artificial world. Even if the human world has a higher degree of artificiality, it is still the case that various animal species use instruments and build dwelling places, to name two typical features of using nature's resources to build an artificial world. The same is true for permanence. If, for Arendt in *The Human Condition*, permanence and artificiality are the two most important aspects of the human world, we can now conclude that Arendt's extension of world to animals is consistent for animal worlds are, indeed, not devoid of artificiality and permanence. Think for instance of the hills built by termites and nests built by birds: both are worldly structures that remain and are (re-)used for some time.

To conclude, the recalibration of the concept of world and the natural-artificial distinction has consequences for the human-animal dichotomy. It replaces the dichotomy with the conception of an earthly space of appearances shared by humans and animals and it does away with the suggestion that there can be a purely natural nature on the one hand, and a purely artificial world on the other in favor of a world pervaded by the cycles of nature.

The recalibration of plurality

Plurality as the law of the earth entails a generalization of plurality that includes animals and potentially all of organic nature. In *The Human Condition* plurality constitutes the distinguishing feature of humans in that only humans, and not animals, are able to achieve, through word and deed, the individuation that is rendered in a biography. As in the case of world, the generalization of plurality does not mean that Arendt undoes the human-animal dichotomy completely to relapse into a generalizing conception of humans as simply another animal species. If anything, she undoes the dichotomy not rigorously enough, as we will see. She presents a re-interpretation of plurality that distinguishes between levels of plurality which make for a more nuanced human-animal distinction but which raises questions as well.

The re-interpretation runs partly parallel to the short but rich description of plurality in *The Human Condition*. In this book, Arendt distinguishes plurality from "otherness" and from "variation and distinction" (Arendt 1958, 176). She describes otherness as the

general ontological quality of everything that exists. Even the mathematical construct of identity, A = A, presupposes otherness for there is a first A and a second A. The spatial and temporal difference between the first and second A enables identification. Identity and sameness presuppose difference and otherness. In order for beings to be identified as the same, they have to differ, however minimally, for instance a difference in time or space, as in the mathematical formula A = A.[14] Arendt describes variation and distinction as resulting from the way organic life produces otherness, in contrast to the passive multiplicity of inorganic objects. Human plurality finally, is described as the activity of distinguishing oneself in word and deed, and thereby revealing who you are.

The three levels of otherness, distinction and variation, and finally plurality, return in the first chapter of *The Life of the Mind*. The general ontological characteristic of otherness, making for the sheer multiplicity of things, returns as "the infinite diversity of appearances" (Arendt 1978, 20). The infinite diversity of appearances refers to the world as earthly space of appearances, including organic and inorganic nature in so far as it appears. The diversity of appearances is subsequently specified by the distinction between inorganic and organic nature. In contrast to the "inorganic thereness of lifeless matter" which merely appears, living beings appear and perceive (Arendt 1978, 21). They perceive appearances and are perceived as appearances, making for the variation and distinction Arendt mentions in *The Human Condition*. The distinction of organic and inorganic nature, added in *The Life of the Mind*, explains that diversity, variation and distinction are the correlate of organic nature's faculties of perception. To speak of an infinite diversity of appearances only makes sense if there are beings who perceive the diversity of what appears. To speak simply and generally of an infinite diversity of appearances is still imprecise since perception is always perspectival. Depending on sense apparatus, spatial and temporal location, physiological, cognitive and other factors, the same event is perceived differently by different species and by different individuals of the same species. Hence, in concrete instances the general diversity of appearances is more adequately described as variation and distinction. The perception of the same appearance, e.g. a rain storm, varies, depending on the various perspectives of the perceiving living beings.

The crucial new addition in *The Life of the Mind*, in comparison to *The Human Condition*, is the observation, taken from Portmann, that living beings have "an urge toward self-display" (Arendt 1978, 21).[15] The introduction of the feature of self-display substantiates Arendt's generalization of plurality as the law of the earth but also gives rise to an inconsistency. Arendt describes the self-display of living beings in terms of the metaphor of actors who appear on the stage of a phenomenal world which is common to all that is alive. For "every living thing depends upon a world that solidly appears as the location for its own appearance, on fellow-creatures to play with, and on spectators to

14 In Heidegger (1957) and Derrida (1967) one finds a similar observation. Heidegger argues that identity presupposes the ontological difference of being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seienden*). In his deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence Derrida introduces the concept of *différance,* which refers to the movement of spatial and temporal differentiations between signs, generating meaning.

15 In emphasizing self-display, Arendt relies on the work of the zoologist Adolf Portmann (1961 and 1967).

acknowledge and recognize its existence." (Arendt 1978, 21-22)[16] She specifies that "to appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectators (…) Seeming corresponds to the fact that every appearance, its identity notwithstanding, is perceived by a plurality of spectators."(Arendt 1978, 21) In other words, self-display implies a plurality of spectators that acknowledge and recognize the living beings who display themselves. Spectators are plural because self-display implies interaction with other living beings who perceive the display and it is in and through this interaction that individuation and, hence, pluralist distinction become possible. However, a few pages later Arendt states that "distinction and individuation occur through speech, the use of verbs and nouns" (Arendt 1978, 34). The claim that distinction and individuation are enabled by speech clearly contradicts Arendt's exposition of self-display. The latter implies that animals are capable of distinction and individuation whereas the former denies it since animals don't speak.

How does this contradiction arise? In order to answer this question we have to take a closer look at the passage in which the quoted observation occurs. In this passage Arendt introduces a distinction between self-display and self-presentation which is then linked to Aristotle's distinction between affections of soul and thoughts. I will quote the passage in full:

> In addition to the urge toward self-display by which living things fit themselves into a world of appearances, men also *present* themselves in deed and word and thus indicate how they *wish* to appear, what in their opinion is fit to be seen and what is not. This element of deliberate choice in what to show and what to hide seems specifically human. *Up to a point* we can choose how to appear to others, and this appearance is by no means the outward manifestation of an inner disposition; if it were, we probably would all act and speak alike. Here, too we owe to Aristotle the crucial distinctions. 'What is spoken out', he says, 'are symbols of affects in the soul, and what is written down are symbols of spoken words. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all. *That however of what these primarily are symbols, the affections [pathēmata] of the soul, are the same for all*.' These affections are 'naturally' expressed by 'inarticulate noises [which] also reveal something, for instance, those made by animals.' Distinction and individuation occur through speech, the use of verbs and nouns, and these are not the products or 'symbols' of the soul but of the mind: 'Nouns themselves and verbs resemble [*eoiken*].... thoughts [*noēmasin*]' (Arendt 1978, 34; italics in the original).

In the first half of the passage Arendt distinguishes between self-presentation, based on deliberate choice, and self-display. Whereas all living beings have the urge toward self-

16 This description presupposes the ability to move and play, it seems therefore to exclude plants and trees. I will leave the question open in how far plurality as law of the earth applies to all of organic nature.

display, only human beings are capable of deliberate self-presentation. This distinction is confirmed a few pages later: "Self-presentation is distinguished from self-display by the active and conscious choice of the image shown; self-display has no choice but to show whatever properties a living being possesses. Self-presentation would not be possible without a degree of self-awareness – a capability inherent in the reflexive character of mental activities and clearly transcending mere consciousness, which we probably share with the higher animals."(Arendt 1978, 36)

As it is based on the ability to deliberate, the human-animal distinction in terms of self-presentation and self-display seems uncontroversial. More importantly, it does not contradict the animals' capacity to distinguish and identify for that does not necessarily require deliberation. It is only when Arendt links this animal-human distinction to the much more debatable distinction she takes from Aristotle that the inconsistency arises. Aristotle distinguishes between two levels of expression. On the most basic level, living beings express affections of the soul in the form of inarticulate noises. These affections of the soul are the same for all living beings and they are expressed in inarticulate noises. This basic level of expression is distinguished from expression in the form of articulate noises, i.e. nouns and verbs. What is expressed in articulate language is something resembling thought. This is clearly a reference to language as a an artificial system of symbols, typical of humans and not of animals. The distinction in levels of expression suggests that animals are only capable of inarticulate noises with the help of which they can communicate, for instance alert each other. By taking up Aristotle's distinction and commenting that individuation and distinction are only possible in articulate language, Arendt excludes animals from plurality.

Now that we have seen how the inconsistency arises, the next question is why. What is its cause? In the next section I will argue that Arendt explicates a valid point in unfitting or incorrect terms. I think Arendt is right in distinguishing between animals and humans in terms of self-display and self-presentation but her explication of this distinction fails. The distinction between self-presentation only humans are capable of, and the self-display all living beings perform, does not correspond to having and lacking the capacity to distinguish and individuate but, rather, to active distinction and individuation and passive distinction and individuation. To make this case I will look in more detail at what Portmann had to say about expression and communication in animals. For as we will see, expression and communication in animals involves more than inarticulate noises.

Expression and individuation in animals

For Portmann self-display, *Selbstdarstellung* in German, is the way animals express themselves.[17] Self-display is not limited to visible appearance but includes anything

17 The whole discussion of Portmann in this section is based on, and inspired by the discussion of Portmann in Annabelle Dufourcq's recent study on *The Imaginary of Animals* (2022), 131-144. In this rich and fascinating study, inspired by the work of Portmann, Merleau-Ponty, biosemiotics and lot of empirical and ethological research, the author's argument goes much further than what I attempt to do here. Whereas I stick to

perceptible through the senses, for instance bird songs. "Through hundreds and thousands of structures and movements, scents and sounds, creatures speak to creatures, to members of the species, to enemies, sometimes even to 'friends' from other species. All that speaks and is seen, heard, smelt or otherwise 'comprehended', can create significant relationships between one life center and another."[18] Portmann characterizes self-display as speaking and he criticizes a functionalist reduction of self-display to "fitness for survival. (…) We cannot adequately understand the structure of such objects as feathers and fur in all their finest details unless we assume that this outward appearance has been designed for something more than those functions which we know are necessary to preserve life (…) We must assume that they have also been designed in a very special way to meet the eye of the beholder."[19] It is no surprise then, that for Portmann self-display is not simply and not only about the way species expresses itself. As Dufourcq comments, through the appearance of each animal a "twofold identity is represented. On the one hand, the identity of the species shows through in a systematic manner: its manifestation is reproduced over and over again through the ontogeny of each individual. (…) On the other hand, a more or less individualized, but possibly highly individualized, *Selbstdarstellung* occurs throughout the animal kingdom."(Dufourcq 2022, 142).

Let's return to what Arendt has to say about animals. Arendt is right in denying animals the capacity to express themselves in verbs and nouns but she is wrong in denying them the capacity to distinguish and individuate. Animals lack the artificial and abstract system of symbolic language, typical of human populations. But animals and humans share embodied means of expression – referred to as inarticulate noises in Arendt – that also enable distinction and individuation. The enormous and varied range of embodied expression, for example birdsong, the repertoire of meows and woofs cat and dogs are capable of, wing patterns in butterflies, movements in bees, allows animals not only to communicate with other living beings, but also to individuate and differentiate. How could that not be the case? Mating behavior and sexual selection is all about differentiation and individuation. Take for example the birdsong of male birds who want to please female birds. Though the chirping of birds of the same kind, say blackbirds, is similar, female birds discriminate between the male birds, on the basis of their birdsong,

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Arendt's distinction of (human) self-presentation and (human and animal) self-display, Dufourcq argues for the emergence of symbols and signs in animal communication, and also for animals' capacity to intentional deceit, two issues that undermine the distinction. Partly on the basis of Portmann, Dufourcq reaches the conclusion that "The lateral kinship between non-human and human animals is symmetrical instead of hierarchical. Non-human animals intentionally and actively project their *Umwelt* and expose themselves to the experience of the discrepancy between actual and virtual, for instance, between the quasi-hallucinated prey and its actual incarnation. Similarly, non-human animals sense the gap between interiority and exteriority, as well as between the hidden and the expressed. At least a nascent reference to other perspectives arises, a reference that becomes central in intentionally deceitful behaviors as well as in phenomena of joint attention, when, for example, animals such as goats, horses, dogs, many birds, and cetaceans follow another individual's gaze instead of simply focusing on an object (….) [N]on-human animals essentially play with perspectives, which makes them subjects, eminently, and part of the intersubjective analogical system of meaning and transposition." (Dufourcq 2022, 166) Though I sympathize with this conclusion, I will not follow it because it goes beyond what is defensible as an interpretation of Arendt's view of animals in *The Life of the Mind*.

18 Portmann 1964, 95-96, cited in Dufourcq 2022, 140.

19 Portmann 1967, 25, cited in Dufourcq 2022, 142.

and select one individual male bird to mate with. But as Portmann argues, the 'speaking' of animals, their expression and communication, should not be reduced to what is functional in Darwinist terms. Animals do not only communicate functionally, they also communicate to convey meaning. They also play as Dufourcq argues extensively and shows in concrete detail.[20]

Arendt might also be right in believing that 'the soul' inside members of the same species is alike but she is wrong in denying unique individuation of animals. The expression of basic emotions, like fear or aggression, seems indeed similar, so much so that living beings can recognize the expression of basic emotions, sometimes even across species barriers. We notice the aggressive behavior of the dog and the bull if we try to walk past them, there is no difficulty of understanding in these situations. But the expressiveness of animal's self-display goes far beyond the direct communication of "affections of the soul", of the basic and recognizable emotions. Individual members of the same species differ – there are nervous and complacent cats, aggressive and playful dogs, inquisitive and sleepy sheep – and their expressive behavior varies accordingly. Apart from the character of the animal itself, the patterns, details, nuances and complexities of self-display result from interactions with other animals, including humans, and from interaction with the surrounding world. Cats, dogs and other animal species are capable of distinguishing between and identifying things and other living beings by their sense of smell and by other discriminating senses. What is more, they are able to discriminate to the extent of identifying unique individuals. Not only the farmer, also the cows are able to discriminate between themselves and identify individual cows in the herd. In tandem with embodied expression, there is embodied uniqueness in both humans and animals. Both animals and humans are capable of picking up on embodied uniqueness. Though the capacity to discriminate and identify by smell is underdeveloped in humans, we are adept at discriminating between and identifying other human beings on the basis of perceptible embodied characteristics like gait, posture, tone and timbre of voice, and facial expressions.

Even though both humans and animals are capable of distinction, individuation and uniqueness, and therefore of plurality, it still makes sense to distinguish, as Arendt does, between the self-presentation only humans are capable of, and the self-display all living beings perform. Arendt describes self-presentation as the reflective choice of how to appear to others. Self-presentation can therefore be described as the capacity to actively and consciously distinguish and individuate oneself, it has the presentation of the self as its reflective goal. Self-display does not have the presentation of the self as its conscious goal. Rather, it results in distinction and individuation, without any conscious effort that has the presenting of oneself as its goal. Compared to the active and conscious distinction and individuation of oneself in self-presentation, the distinction and individuation of self-

20 Take for instance the example of dolphin Dolly: when a cloud of cigarette smoke was released against the glass through which Dolly was looking, she swam to her mother, returned and released a mouthful of milk with the same effect as the smoke. Dufourcq comments: "Dolly thus proved able to combine, in a startling behavior, an impressive number of imaginative skills. Her 'milk smoking' involves imitation, analogical reasoning, creativity, and the attempt to establish communication."(Dufourcq 2022, 5).

display is passive or unwitting in the sense that it is not about presenting oneself. Self-presentation as the reflective choice of how to appear to others involves the differentiating process of words and deeds, it refers to the reflective choice of words and actions by which one wants to show oneself to others, to the world. Differentiation through words and deeds is a lifelong process, it establishes human biographies. In order to discern the uniqueness of a person through her words and deeds, we need to engage with and understand her words and deeds over some period of time. Self-display conveys embodied uniqueness. Though it involves intentional, goal-oriented and playful behavior, it does not involve reflective choice of words and deeds. And while embodied uniqueness may be detected instantaneously and intuitively, to discern uniqueness through words and deeds is never instantaneous nor intuitive.

Conclusion

The distinction between self-presentation and self-display makes sense as a distinction between humans and animals. It does not simply refer to having and lacking the artificial system of symbolic language but to something more subtle, namely the reflective choice of the words and actions by which one wants to appear in the world versus the passive and unwitting distinction and individuation through self-display. Arendt is right in emphasizing that human self-presentation is only possible up to a point because, like all living beings, human beings partake in self-display and embodied expression and therefore always, again up to a point, betray who they are. Self-presentation does not replace self-display. Rather, the unwitting display of oneself, of how one walks, talks, and holds oneself for instance, is always part of even the most carefully deliberated and executed self-presentation.

The human-animal distinction in terms of self-presentation and self-display is therefore not dichotomous. There is overlap between humans and animals. Individuating self-display, its recognition and the consciousness required for both is common to humans and (higher) animal species. The system of symbolic language discriminates between human and animal self-display. Upon their birth, humans are exposed to, and inserted in the system of symbolic language. Mastering symbolic language enables self-consciousness, and therefore a measure of choice and control over how to display oneself. Despite the particularity of human self-presentation, humans and animals share embodied expression and communication, enabling mutual understanding and communication that goes (far) beyond the functional.

Finally, this explication of the human-animal distinction is consistent with Arendt's claim that plurality is the law of the earth. For animals to achieve plurality they must be able to distinguish and individuate, and to recognize distinctions and individuals. Self-display does allow animals to achieve plurality, therefore plurality is the law of the earth.

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