

## **Conference Report – Judgment, Pluralism, and Democracy: On the Desirability of Speaking with Others**

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On 2-3 March 2023, the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities (HAC) at Bard College hosted ‘Judgment, Pluralism, and Democracy: On the Desirability of Speaking with Others’—an interdisciplinary humanities conference on the importance of talking with others in a democratic, pluralistic society.

Organized by Dr. Nicholas Dunn, Klemens von Klemperer Fellow in the HAC, and Nirvana Tanoukhi, Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College, the conference brought together more than twenty-five speakers from a range of disciplines, including philosophy, political theory, law, literature, education, and communication & media studies.

Dunn and Tanoukhi conceived of the conference with the aim of providing a space for discussion about some of the crises of our contemporary political culture, including the problematization of free speech, the breakdown of political discourse, and increasingly deep disagreement and polarization. As Dunn stated in his opening remarks to the conference, “we have lost our ability to disagree with each other—to argue with each other in meaningful and constructive ways.” While most responses to these problems have focused on the issue of free speech, the conference proposed stepping back to ask the question of why it is necessary that we speak with others at all.

The conference theme took its cue from both Arendt and Kant’s idea of thinking from the standpoint of the other. Arendt, following Kant, makes the radical claim that thinking itself requires others. As Kant puts it concisely, in a passage from his reflections on anthropology that Arendt is fond of, “Company is indispensable for the thinker.” As Arendt puts it, in her well-known lectures on Kant, “The very faculty of thinking depends on others to be possible at all.” In this, Arendt makes clear not only the connection between judging and communicability, but the fundamental importance of sociability for such a relation. Sociability, Arendt writes, concerns “the fact that no man can live alone, that men are interdependent not merely in their needs and cares but in their highest faculty: the human mind, which will not function outside of human society.”

Day 1 of the conference featured a range of roundtable discussions on topics including the ethics of persuasion, friendship, publicity, deliberative democracy, and free speech. The roundtable highlighted the ways in which productive modes of communicating can be formed across disciplines, among people with different worldviews, approaches to

information, and sets of assumptions. On Day 2, a range of papers were presented, drawing on diverse sources ranging from the ancient Greek tradition to the thought of Stanley Cavell and Iris Young, and addressing topics such as courage, respect, love, and aesthetic judgment.

The conference also inaugurated a [partnership](#) between the Berlin-based publisher De Gruyter and HAC, commencing with an annual lecture series: the *De Gruyter-Arendt Center Lecture in Political Thinking*. The series aims to support HAC's goal of fostering a space for nonpartisan, passionate, and deepening discussions about the contemporary political and ethical landscape. The inaugural lecture was delivered by Professor Linda Zerilli (The University of Chicago).

Professor Zerilli's lecture, '[Arendt and the Problem of Democratic Persuasion](#),' served as the keynote address for the conference. Zerilli is the Charles E. Merriam Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the College at The University of Chicago. She is also Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies in the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, where she served as Faculty Director from 2010-2016. She is the author of three books (*Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke and Mill*; *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*; and *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*) and numerous articles on issues in feminist thought, democratic theory, aesthetics, Continental philosophy, and the politics of language. Zerilli's lecture took up the Arendtian idea that, not only is speaking politically inherently persuasive, but that persuasion involves as much change to the speaker's worldview as it does to the listener's.

The second annual De Gruyter Arendt lecture will be delivered by Peg Birmingham (DePaul University) on March 7, 2024. Professor Birmingham's lecture will be part of a two-day conference on the relevance of Arendt's constitutional and legal thought for contemporary Supreme Court politics.

HAC, founded in 2006, is home to the Hannah Arendt Collection, which represents approximately 5,000 volumes, ephemera, and pamphlets that made up Arendt's personal library. The center also organizes many public events, including an annual Fall conference and a virtual reading group. For more information, visit <https://hac.bard.edu>.