The Review of Politics 86 (2024), 505–528.

doi:10.1017/S0034670524000214

# Animal Trouble: Arendt and the Question of Anthropocentrism

*Ayten Gündoğdu*

**Abstract:** This article examines animals and animality in Hannah Arendt's political thought by focusing on the phenomenological approach she develops in *The Life of the Mind*. Building on the works of Adolf Portmann and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Arendt invites us to understand the world in terms of the plurality of all living things who appear to each other in anticipation of being perceived in their distinctness. While Arendt's phenomenology is generative for rethinking politics beyond human exclusivity, it also sits uneasily with her anthropocentric claims that risk reducing animals to reactive organisms driven by biological necessity. Mobilizing Arendt's phenomenology against her anthropocentrism, the article outlines a worldly politics in which all living things engage in multitudinous forms of intra- and interspecies encounter, reciprocity, and responsiveness. To illustrate this worldly politics, the article revisits Arendt's famous call for "a right to have rights" and engages with the debates on animal rights.

In loving memory of Panos and Charlie, who made their appearance in the world in their "shining brightness."

## Introduction

In a fable titled "Die weisen Tiere" ("The Wise Animals"), Hannah Arendt recounts the story of a little girl whose search for a wild goose with a beautiful black spot transports her from her small village to a magical forest inhabited by whimsical creatures.[1] Throughout her journey, the girl learns "bird

Ayten Gündoğdu is Associate Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, 3009 Broadway Avenue, New York, NY, 10027 USA (agundogdu@barnard.edu).

I would like to thank Adam Bell, Jocelyn Boryczka, Mary Dietz, Lisa Disch, Leonard Feldman, Lida Maxwell, Lexi Neame, Maria Robaszkiewicz, Nica Siegel, and Linda Zerilli for their feedback at different workshops and conferences. Special thanks to Çiğdem Çıdam and Salih Emre Gerçek for carefully reading an earlier draft.

[1]Hannah Arendt, "Die weisen Tiere," unpublished story (n.d.), The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress. I rely on Jerome Kohn's unpublished translation of

speech" and encounters many animals known to us from the Old Testament and literature, including the serpent who led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise; an enormous fish who turns out to be the Leviathan; and the snow-white elephant from the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, immortalized in Rilke's poem "Das Karussell." The little girl finds the goose with the black spot at the end, and the moment she presses the spot, the goose turns into a beautiful little boy who kisses her and asks her to marry him. Once the little girl agrees to this proposal, the two wait for an elephant to "slowly carry them back to the human world."[2]

Just like any other fable, "The Wise Animals" generates fantastical animals that take on properties characteristically attributed to humans. While such figurative abstraction may run the risk of displacing the lives of actual animals and making it difficult to recognize them as subjects in their own right,[3] it can also engender new ways of thinking about political community, action, and membership by questioning human beings' exclusive claim to capacities such as speech and bringing into view a vibrant world shared by all living beings who interact with each other in multitudinous ways. Accordingly, the fable genre can unsettle the anthropocentric dogmas that reduce animals to reactive organisms and crown human beings as the sovereigns of the earth.[4]

Arendt wrote "The Wise Animals" possibly around 1945, but never published it. Her published work depicts animals arguably in a much less flattering light. She has been criticized by scholars such as Allen Feldman and Julia Lupton for seeing animals as "a multitude devoid of singularity,"[5] confined to the cyclical necessities of biological life, and understanding humanity as "the

the fable, "The Wise Animals" (trans. 1991). Kohn Archive of Hannah Arendt/Mary McCarthy Material, Dobkin Collection.

[2]Arendt, "The Wise Animals," 20.

[3]Jacques Derrida, for example, describes the fable genre as a form of "anthropomorphic taming" and "a discourse *of* man, on man." *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 37, emphasis original. This view changes, I think, in his lectures on animality and sovereignty, which invite us to understand politics in terms of "affabulation." *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 35.

[4]In Arendt's fable, such an unsettling effect arises from the little girl's realization of the limitations of human language in her interactions with animals. For an account of the generative possibilities of the fable genre, see Heather Keenleyside, *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and Living Beings in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[5]Allen Feldman, "Inhumanitas: Political Speciation, Animality, Natality, Defacement," in *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*, ed. Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 129.

cultivation of that part of man that is *not* animal."[6] Critics have also taken issue with Arendt's exclusion of animals from politics. Cary Wolfe has argued that she embraces "the gatekeeper function of speech" as the capacity that endows only human beings with a right to politics.[7] Human beings and animals do not even belong to the same world in Arendt's political thought, according to Kelly Oliver: even though members of the *Homo sapiens* live on the same earth with other animal species, as human beings transcending their animality, they do not share the world they built on that earth with nonhuman animals.[8]

This article challenges the assumption that an Arendtian understanding of politics necessarily entails an exclusion of animals and animality, as it locates crucial resources for rethinking politics beyond the human/animal divide in the phenomenological approach Arendt develops in her posthumously published *The Life of the Mind*. Reading Arendt against Arendt, I mobilize her worldly phenomenology of living things to question the anthropocentric claims that surface time and again in her political thought. Phenomenology anchors itself in the world of appearances (*phainomena*, or "things appearing to view") and emphasizes the interchangeability of "being" and "appearance" for living beings.[9] Arendt's corpus is characterized by such a phenomenological affirmation of appearances against a metaphysics that searches for the hidden, invisible ground of reality. But her phenomenology takes significantly radical dimensions in her late work. Building on the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann's research on animal appearance and the late work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she introduces us to a world in which all "living things *make their appearance* like actors on a stage set for them."[10] Within this phenomenological framework, plurality is no longer discussed only in relation to the human condition but rather is posited as "the law of the earth"[11] that applies to all forms of life whose appearance always presupposes the presence of spectators—a crucial claim that can serve as the starting point for a worldly politics that cuts across the hierarchical human/animal divide that Arendt herself often invokes.

This article joins but also departs from numerous scholarly efforts to utilize *The Life of the Mind* for rethinking nature, embodiment, and animality in

[6]Julia Lupton, "Arendt in Italy: Or, the Taming of the Shrew," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 8, no. 1 (February 2012): 70, emphasis original.

[7]Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 8.

[8]Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 74.

[9]Tom Rockmore, "Hegel and Husserl: Two Phenomenological Reactions to Kant," *Hegel Bulletin* 38, no. 1 (2017): 68; Karl Schuhmann, "Phenomenology: A Reflection on the History of the Term," in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, ed. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (London: Routledge, 2012), 675.

[10]Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 21, emphasis in the original.

[11]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 19.

Arendt's political thought. Since the posthumous publication of this book, readers have pointed to the significant conceptual and argumentative shifts resulting from her engagements with Portmann's research on animal forms. If the body was nothing other than an organism confined to biological necessities in *The Human Condition*, Robert W. Major argues, it emerges as "a lived body whose home is the world of appearances" in *The Life of the Mind*.[12] The concept of "life" also undergoes a remarkable transformation, according to Jeremy Arnold, who suggests that Arendt stops reducing "life" to metabolismic processes and "reconciles" it with "plurality, appearance, display, self-assertion, and individuality."[13] Accordingly, Laura Ephraim finds in *The Life of the Mind* resources for an Arendtian environmentalism in which "nature's appearances" are among "the enabling conditions of possibility for freedom and plurality."[14] Read in this way, *The Life of the Mind* is taken to mark a radical departure when it comes to the question of nonhuman animals: in contrast to *The Human Condition*, it associates "appearance" no longer solely with human "self-display and virtuosity," Kimberley Curtis argues, but rather with all animate beings.[15] This revised understanding of appearance pushes Arendtian politics "beyond the species boundary," according to Diego Rossello, and urges us to understand nonhuman animals as political actors making claims in the agora by their very appearance that solicits a response.[16]

While I agree that *The Life of the Mind* urges us to rethink animals and animality in Arendt's political thought, I also maintain that anthropocentrism

[12]Robert W. Major, "A Reading of Hannah Arendt's 'Unusual' Distinction between Labor and Work," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), 149. For "an affirmative account of embodiment" in both *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*, however, see Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, "The Value of the Surface: Reappreciating Embodiment, Labor, and Necessity in Arendt's Political Thought," *Critical Times* 4, no. 2 (August 2021): 263–83.

[13]Jeremy Arnold, "Caught in Penelope's Web: Transformations of the Concept of Life from *The Human Condition* to *The Life of the Mind*," *Constellations* 23, no. 4 (December 2016): 608.

[14]Laura Ephraim, "Save the Appearances! Toward an Arendtian Environmental Politics," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 3 (2022): 985, 990.

[15]Kimberley Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 15; see also 28. See also Kascha Semonovitch, "Between 'The Life of The Mind' and 'Mind in Life': Arendt and Merleau-Ponty on Speciation and Plurality," *Philosophy Today* 55 (2011): 133–42. For a similar conclusion drawn from Arendt's *Denktagebuch*, see Anne O'Bryne, "The Task of Knowledgeable Love: Arendt and Portmann in Search of Meaning," in *Artifacts of Thinking: Reading Hannah Arendt's* Denktagebuch, ed. Roger Berkowitz and Ian Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 103.

[16]Diego Rossello, "The Animal Condition in the Human Condition: Rethinking Arendt's Political Action beyond the Human Species," *Contemporary Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (2022): 235.

persists as a key problem in this work and sets obstacles in the path of any effort to rethink an Arendtian politics that is not exclusively human. Understood as an ideology that elevates human beings above the rest of the living, anthropocentrism casts nonhuman animals as deficient forms of life (lacking speech, reason, self-reflexivity, etc.) and excludes them from political and normative consideration.[17] Arendt's account of animals in *The Life of the Mind*—not unlike Portmann's research that guides her inquiry into animal appearance—is anthropocentric because it continues to subscribe to a hierarchy of the living at the top of which stand human beings. Especially important in this regard is her argument that, while all living things have an urge to self-display, only human beings are capable of choosing how they wish to appear to others.[18]

The phenomenological approach that Arendt develops in *The Life of the Mind*, however, provides crucial resources for questioning her anthropocentric moves and rethinking politics beyond human exclusivity. With this argument, this article diverges from the existing literature in a second key respect: if we want to understand politics as an interspecies activity and reconsider the world in its true plurality, we have to turn to the phenomenology that Arendt articulates by building on the work of Portmann and Merleau-Ponty, and it is precisely this method that has been overlooked by scholars interested in outlining an Arendtian approach to nonhuman animals and nature.[19] Arendt's worldly phenomenology of living things achieves nothing less than a fabulation, not unlike the one in "The Wise Animals," in the sense that it presents animals in ways that radically differ from their conventional representations as instinctive mechanisms reduced to automated reactions and relegated to the status of objects in the service of humans. Animals appear instead in their embodied liveliness as fellow actors and spectators who creatively and freely participate in the ongoing constitution of the world, which serves as a common space of appearance for all forms of life, "natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal."[20]

[17]Adam Weitzenfeld and Melanie Joy, "An Overview of Anthropocentrism, Humanism, and Speciesism in Critical Animal Theory," in *Defining Critical Animal Studies: An Intersectional Social Justice Approach for Liberation*, ed. Anthony J. Nocella II, John Sorenson, Kim Socha, and Atsuko Matsuoka (New York: Peter Lang 2014), 5–6.

[18]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 30–37.

[19]See, for example, Ephraim, "Save the Appearances!" and Rossello, "The Animal Condition."

[20]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 19. My point is inspired by Saidiya Hartman's description of "critical fabulation" as a counter-historical method adopted "to describe 'the resistance of the object.'" See Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 11. While Hartman's focus is the challenging task of understanding the agency of the enslaved, I am extending "fabulation" to a phenomenology that contests the conventional status of animals as objects of property. For an interpretation of Hartman alongside Arendt, see Bonnie Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), chap. 3.

I discuss how Arendt's engagements with Portmann and Merleau-Ponty give rise to a distinctive understanding of the world as a shared space of appearance, perception, and responsiveness for all living things. This phenomenological account is troubled by the human/animal hierarchy that resurfaces in Arendt's work, as I discuss in the second section. Such a hierarchy is at work most notably in Arendt's ranking of "lower" and "higher" species according to their capacity to choose how they wish to appear to others; not surprisingly, humans stand at the top. Navigating the crosscurrents in *The Life of the Mind*, I argue that Arendt's anthropocentrism can be maintained only at the risk of reintroducing the very metaphysics she persuasively challenges in her phenomenological account of the world. The third section questions Arendt's human/animal hierarchy by deploying her phenomenological interpretations of semblance, intentionality, and common sense, which destabilize her dogmatic generalizations about "humans" and "animals" by drawing attention to the manifold commonalities and differences within and among species. In the final section I discuss the broader political implications of the phenomenological approach outlined in this article by turning to Arendt's famous argument for "a right to have rights," which entails, among other things, a right to be recognized as a person before the law. Arendt's phenomenology of living things opens a path beyond the impasses of the animal rights debates, as it turns away from the endless metaphysical quests to ground personhood in an inherent capacity such as sentience and invites us to reconsider it instead as an artificial mask (*persona*), or a legal fiction that enables public appearance. Personhood turns out to be a fabulation of sorts, alerting us to the need for representative and imaginative practices that are necessary to transform animals—and humans—into rights-bearing subjects and equalize living things by taking into account the distinctions within and across different species.

## 1. Outlines of a Worldly Phenomenology

Arendt's key goal in *The Life of the Mind* is to reconsider the activities of *vita contemplativa* (i.e., thinking, willing, judgment) as inherently intersubjective. In the first volume on thinking, she takes aim at the Cartesian *cogito* that casts doubt on all sensory perception and grounds proof of one's existence in the activity of the doubting mind. Against this view, Arendt argues that even the philosopher who methodically doubts the certainty of the world and transposes living experience into an object of thought cannot help but presuppose what Merleau-Ponty calls "perceptual faith," which denotes an "unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us."[21] The world of

[21]Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 3; see also Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 46.

appearances, distrusted by the philosophical tradition as an illusory realm, becomes the very ground of reality in Arendt's phenomenological account: "The worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else, who guarantees its 'objective' reality."[22] Accordingly, our sense of reality—the reality of the world, of the things in it, and of our own self—is derived from our perception of the world with our "body and its senses" and the assurances we receive from "fellow-creatures" that what we perceive is also perceived by them.[23]

Arendt's phenomenological understanding of thinking as an embodied activity grounded in the world of appearances draws on both the late work of Merleau-Ponty, particularly *The Visible and the Invisible*, and Portmann's zoological research on animal forms. Her turn to Merleau-Ponty in developing her thesis about thinking is to be expected, but why enlist a zoologist for these purposes? Shortly after the publication of *The Life of the Mind*, Bernard Elevitch expressed similar puzzlement in a quite harshly written review of the book, as he drew attention to Arendt's "very odd premises" and "idiosyncrasies," particularly her utilization of the work of Portmann, "who rejects a purely functional explanation of animal behavior in favor of the meaningfulness of its 'very richness of display,'" and her seemingly erratic moves from one field to another—"ornithology, morphology, aesthetics, metaphysics and psychology all seem to be involved."[24] As baffling as these moves might initially appear, Portmann is no ordinary scientist; his research on animal and plant forms engages with questions drawn from philosophy, art history, and sociology, among other fields. Portmann's work is read and cited by some of the key thinkers of twentieth century, including Merleau-Ponty,[25] Gadamer,[26] and Castoriadis.[27] Arendt finds in Portmann a fellow phenomenologist who affirms the value of the surface against a metaphysics that casts appearances as deceptive semblances.[28] Several mentions of Portmann in Arendt's *Denktagebuch* from 1966 to 1968 indicate her sustained engagement with his work.[29] The syllabus for her seminar "The Life of the Mind: Thinking," taught at the New School in 1974, includes two books of

[22]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 19.

[23]Ibid., 48.

[24]Bernard Elevitch, "Hannah Arendt's Testimony," *Massachusetts Review* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 371.

[25]Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, ed. Dominique Séglard, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 186–90.

[26]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2004), 108.

[27]See Suzi Adams, "Towards a Post-phenomenology of Life: Castoriadis' Critical *Naturphilosophie*," *Cosmos and History* 4, nos. 1–2 (2008): 395.

[28]For Portmann's phenomenological orientations, see Marjorie Grene, "Beyond Darwinism," *Commentary* 40, no. 5 (November 1965): 36.

[29]Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch, 1950 bis 1973*, vol. 2, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper, 2003), 645–47, 649, 684, and 701.

Portmann, *Animal Camouflage* (1959) and *Animal Forms and Patterns* (1967), along with the canonical works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.[30] Her discussion of Portmann in *The Life of the Mind* reflects her long-standing interest in his zoological research and becomes the basis of a phenomenology whose affirmation of the world of appearances is tied to a recognition of the plurality of all living things.

Particularly important for Arendt's purposes is Portmann's critique of biological functionalism that reduces animal forms to the purpose of life preservation. Portmann emphasizes the "form value" or "presentation value" of animal appearance, comparing it to a work of art and arguing that it displays "a capricious free play of creative force" rather than "a technical necessity."[31] Arendt draws on Portmann's critique of biological functionalism to take aim at "the old metaphysical dichotomy of (true) Being and (mere) Appearance."[32] Both the metaphysics criticized by Arendt and the functionalism criticized by Portmann share the assumption that "appearances are deceptive and conceal from us the true nature of things."[33] Just as the philosopher has a tendency to believe in "the supremacy of the *ground* that does not appear over the surface that does,"[34] the biologist has a tendency to devalue what is visible and reduces the animal body to a container of "the life-preserving viscera."[35]

Arendt supports her critique of metaphysics by mobilizing "the great wealth of fascinating example"[36] that Portmann offers in his critique of biological functionalism, as can be seen in her discussion of bird plumage. Challenging the functionalist understanding of feathers as simply "a warm, protective covering," Portmann reenvisions them as "a coloured garment, the intrinsic worth of which lies solely in its visible appearance."[37] The point is not that feathers have no life-preserving function but that their diverse range of colors, patterns, and textures cannot be explained from a purely functionalist perspective. Portmann calls attention to a striking difference between the visible and invisible parts of the feathers of a hummingbird; whereas the visible parts are "brilliantly iridescent" with "shimmering colors," each feather reflecting different shades of the color spectrum, the parts that are covered have no such iridescence.[38] Portmann draws the

[30]Hannah Arendt, "The Life of the Mind: Thinking" (syllabus for the seminar taught at the New School for Social Research, New York, 1974), The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress.

[31]Adolf Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns: A Study of the Appearance of Animals*, trans. Hella Czech (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 214, 35.

[32]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 23.

[33]Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 17.

[34]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 25, emphasis original.

[35]Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 204; see also Portmann, "On the Uniqueness of Biological Research," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 15, no. 5 (1990): 464.

[36]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 27.

[37]Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 19; see also Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 28.

[38]Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 19–20.

conclusion that bird feathers, and more broadly animal forms, are "optical structures, organs to be looked at, the total appearance of which has a meaning only when it is appreciated as being *directed towards a beholding eye*."[39]

The idea that animals appear in distinct forms in anticipation of spectators takes Portmann and Arendt to the conclusion that each living thing has an "urge to self-display," or an "innate impulse" to make its presence felt by other living beings.[40] For Portmann, the surface of an animal is to be understood as "a coat which raises its wearer to a place apart."[41] Each animal tries to "impress" others with their "characteristic marks" or "recognition marks," presenting itself to the judgment of a beholding eye.[42] Along these lines, Arendt invites us to understand the outward appearance as an attempt to display one's distinctness in the company of other living things: "*whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched.*"[43] Each living thing appears to others with the anticipation that they will potentially "acknowledge and recognize its existence,"[44] and this continuous embodied interaction within and between species makes plurality "the law of the earth," to recall Arendt's formulation.[45]

The phenomenological framework Arendt articulates in *The Life of the Mind* through a critical engagement with Portmann gives rise to some crucial changes in her key concepts and paves the ground for rethinking politics beyond human exclusivity. Take, for example, her concept of "the world." In *The Human Condition*, Arendt draws a distinction between "world" and "earth," as she argues that it is only human beings who are capable of transforming the earth, inhabited by all living beings, into a world by producing relatively durable artifacts.[46] There is no such sharp distinction in *The Life of the Mind*, which instead represents the world as a common space of appearance for all forms of life and extends "worldliness" to all "sentient beings—men and animals, to whom things appear and who as recipients guarantee their reality."[47] Accordingly, all living things are "not just in the world, they are *of the world*;" they do not simply inhabit the world, to put it differently, but also belong to it.[48] Within Arendt's revised phenomenology, all living things are both subjects and objects of perception, and it is the continuous

[39]Ibid., 111, emphasis added.
[40]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 29.
[41]Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 25.
[42]Ibid., 32–33.
[43]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 29, emphasis original.
[44]Ibid., 22.
[45]Ibid., 19.
[46]Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2, 134–35.
[47]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 19.
[48]Ibid., 20, emphasis original.

reversibility or intertwining of perceiving and being perceived that establishes their belonging in the world together. From this perspective, the world is an "intermundane space" (*l'intermonde*), to use Merleau-Ponty's terms, "where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap" with other living things.[49]

Arendt's revised account of the world—as a space characterized by embodied interactions within and among different species—also results in a different understanding of "plurality." *The Human Condition* devotes attention to "human plurality," which she associates with equality and distinctness: plurality implies equality because human beings share the capacity to mutually understand each other, and it is tied to distinctness because human beings have the capacity to distinguish themselves in words and deeds.[50] Especially important for the purposes of a contrast with *The Life of the Mind* is Arendt's effort to distinguish "human distinctness" from what she calls "otherness" or "*alteritas*," which refers to "the sheer multiplication of inorganic objects" as well as the "variations and distinctions" of organic life.[51] Arendt insists that, while "distinctness" is characteristic of all living beings, "unique distinctness" can be achieved by "only man . . . who can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear."[52] The *Life of the Mind*, on the other hand, moves from speech to appearance and reconsiders "plurality" as a condition that characterizes all living things that share "the urge to self-display." Accordingly, plurality arises out of the intersubjective practices of appearing and being perceived in distinct forms on a worldly stage shared with all sentient beings who are all beginners in the sense that their (inter)actions set something into motion that cannot be predicted by necessity or utility.[53]

This last point is key to rethinking politics as an interspecies activity, centered on the co-appearance and co-spectatorship of all living things in the world, as Diego Rossello highlights in an article that challenges "the conventional wisdom that conceives Arendt's work as a sophisticated representative of phenomenological humanism."[54] Drawing particularly on her engagement with Portmann in *The Life of the Mind*, Rossello argues for rethinking Arendtian politics across the human/animal boundary by foregrounding "her performative, theatrical and spectatorial understanding of political action."[55]

While I agree that *The Life of the Mind* generates these possibilities, I diverge from Rossello in two important respects. First, it is impossible to enlist Arendt

[49]Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 48.
[50]Arendt, *Human Condition*, 175–76.
[51]Ibid., 176.
[52]Ibid.
[53]Here I am revising Arendt's argument about human actors as beginners; see *The Human Condition*, 177.
[54]Rossello, "Animal Condition," 235.
[55]Ibid., 232.

for such an interspecies politics of appearance without carefully grappling with her anthropocentric moves. Rossello appreciates Arendtian action for its orientation to the world rather than "the inner life of the self," as he underscores her focus on appearance rather than "inner motives or intentions."[56] What he does not mention, however, is that Arendt's discussion of animals reintroduces a problematic conception of "authorial intentionality"[57] in an effort to distinguish human self-display from that of animals, as she characterizes the latter as lacking the capacity for reflection and choice. As I discuss in the next section, Arendt's anthropocentric move also risks reintroducing the very metaphysics that she argues against in *The Life of the Mind* and undermining her well-known conception of nonsovereign action developed particularly in *The Human Condition*.

This metaphysical turn can be resisted by mobilizing Arendt's phenomenology against her anthropocentrism, and this is the second way in which this article diverges from the scholarship on Arendt's discussion of animals in *The Life of the Mind*. To briefly turn to Rossello again, it is striking that he takes issue with the "phenomenological humanism" often attributed to Arendt, following the work of Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman,[58] but without thinking seriously about the phenomenological underpinnings of Arendt's argument about animal appearance in *The Life of the Mind*. Yet it is precisely Arendt's phenomenological approach that can help us criticize the anthropocentric moves in that work. Accordingly, I propose to drive a wedge between the two terms that constitute "phenomenological humanism," as I argue that Arendt's late phenomenology cannot coexist with a humanism that reserves worldliness, plurality, and politics exclusively for human beings who appear to each other in their unique distinctness in a shared public space.[59]

## 2. A Hierarchy of the Living

Arendt's engagement with Portmann is by no means uncritical. While she appropriates his argument that every living thing has "an urge to appear," she resists his characterization of self-display as a form of "expression," or "the appearance of an inside in an outside."[60] Rejecting that conclusion, Arendt insists that what is revealed in "self-display" is not an "inner self," or a hidden, invisible substance that exists prior to one's appearance in the

[56]Ibid., 233.

[57]Ibid., 234.

[58]Ibid., 220, 230, 235. See Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, "In Heidegger's Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Humanism," *Review of Politics* 46, no. 2 (1984): 183–211.

[59]This is precisely the kind of "phenomenological humanism" that Hinchman and Hinchman attribute to Arendt; see ibid., 201–2.

[60]Portmann quoted in Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 30, 29.

world.[61] While Arendt carefully resists the metaphysics resurfacing in Portmann's turn to inwardness, however, she takes no notice of how that turn is intertwined with an anthropocentrism that constructs a hierarchy of the living and places human beings at the top by attributing to them a richer inner and social life; in fact, she goes on to establish a similar hierarchy in *The Life of the Mind*. Following a brief clarification of the term "anthropocentrism," I discuss Portmann's hierarchy of the living and then examine how a similar hierarchy arises in Arendt's account of self-display at the risk of reintroducing the very metaphysics she powerfully criticizes in *The Life of the Mind*.

Anthropocentrism is an ideology that elevates human beings above the rest of the living on the basis of certain capacities deemed to be exclusively human (e.g., speech, autonomy, imagination) and positions them as the privileged subjects of political and normative consideration.[62] It is not simply a claim about differences between humans and nonhuman animals but rather about their hierarchical ordering on the basis of these posited differences. Nor is anthropocentrism simply a human-centered form of thinking, which, after all, is impossible to avoid from a phenomenological perspective: as embodied beings whose perception is enabled and limited by their own senses, humans cannot help but be human-centered as they think about the world and their relations to other living beings.[63] As different from such a perspective that is open to rethinking and revising existing opinions on the basis of its dynamic experience of the world, anthropocentrism is an ideology that stubbornly insists on questionable generalizations about "humans" and "animals" even in the face of evidence that invalidates them. This latter aspect of "ideology" is emphasized by Arendt, who argues that its coercive logic is resistant to "all experience" and "the reality that we perceive with our own five senses."[64] This resistance can perhaps explain why Portmann holds on to anthropocentric claims that are contradicted by his own scientific research and why Arendt maintains similar claims that undermine her phenomenological arguments.

Portmann's anthropocentricism comes to light in his discussion of expression as a manifestation of "inwardness," which suggests that animals with a more developed "inner psychical world" recognize the members of their

[61]Ibid., 29.

[62]Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 33; Weitzenfeld and Joy, "An Overview of Anthropocentrism," 5–6.

[63]For the distinction between anthropocentrism and a human-centered perspective, see, for example, Sharon R. Krause, "Political Respect for Nature," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 2 (2021): 251; Rafi Youatt, "Interspecies Relations, International Relations: Rethinking Anthropocentric Politics," *Millennium* 43, no. 1 (2014): 210.

[64]Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 470.

species with more certainty "as definite forms."[65] This assumption gives rise to a hierarchy of the living in Portmann, who differentiates between "higher" and "lower" species: whereas the former take appearance significantly in their mode of mutual recognition and have an "intensive communal life" that could be characterized as "a true meeting of independent creatures," the latter lack a rich inner and social life.[66] The "higher" species also enjoy more "freedom and openness" in their interactions with their environments, including their social relations, unlike the "lower" species that are more constrained by hereditary factors and stimuli.[67] Associating "openness" with the human capacities for free decision, responsibility, speech, and spirituality, among other things, Portmann attributes to human beings a "special position," even "sovereign uniqueness," among living things.[68]

Portmann's hierarchy of the living is questioned by his own research that draws attention to, for example, the various forms of expression in moths and caterpillars, deemed to be "simpler forms of animals," as well as the role of "unconscious" activity "even in the spontaneous expressive movements of higher vertebrates."[69] Highlighting the ways in which human speech is "regulated by convention" and human gestures are "ruled by tradition," he invites us to understand both human and nonhuman expression in terms of varying degrees of spontaneity and control.[70] Portmann also draws attention to the dangerous consequences of hierarchically ranking the living according to certain prejudicial criteria. In his objection against functionalists' "preferential attention" to purposive or "'technical' forms of life," he suggests that their exclusive focus on "a privileged cast" renders a wide range of living organisms unintelligible, turning them into "a collection of monstrosities."[71] With this critique, Portmann targets not only functionalism but also the eugenicist science of the twentieth century and its hierarchies of life mobilized especially by Nazis, and in that, cogently captures why anthropocentrism is bad for nonhumans and humans.[72]

Not unlike Portmann, Arendt also makes anthropocentric claims, as can be seen most notably in her contention that "self-display," which is common to all living things, "reaches its climax in the human species."[73] As different from even higher animal species that are capable of communicating their emotions through "glance, gesture, inarticulate sound," Arendt asserts,

[65]Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 185, 183.
[66]Ibid., 183.
[67]Adolf Portmann, "Special Position of Man in the Realm of the Living," *Commentary* 40, no. 5 (November 1965): 39.
[68]Ibid., 40.
[69]Portmann, *Animal forms and Patterns*, 198.
[70]Ibid., 197.
[71]Ibid., 210.
[72]On Nazi eugenics, see Roberto Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), chap. 1.
[73]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 30.

human beings establish their distinctiveness in "speech [that] is meant to be heard and words [that] are meant to be understood by others who also have the ability to speak."[74] Speech renders self-display different, according to her, because it allows human beings to deliberately fashion their appearance. These reflections lead Arendt to draw a sharp contrast between animal "self-display" and human "self-presentation":

> 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. Only self-presentation is open to hypocrisy and pretense, properly speaking.[75]

Arendt depicts animal self-display in terms that imply necessity ("no choice"), which contradicts her Portmann-inspired account of the sportive, creative, and nonpurposive dimensions of animal forms. Whereas animals are "merely reacting to whatever qualities may be given" to them, she contends, human beings are capable of "making an act of deliberate choice among the various potentialities of conduct."[76] On the basis of this contrast, Arendt denies animals, including those ranked higher in her hierarchy of the living, "self-awareness" or reflexive thinking, and along with it, the capacities for "hypocrisy and pretense, properly speaking."[77] The idea that animals are incapable of lying, which entails a conscious form of pretense (what Jacques Derrida calls a "pretense of pretense," a form of deception that is capable of erasing even the traces of its dissimulation), is a common anthropocentric trope—one that denies animals the capacity to "respond" in the proper sense of the term and confines them to "reactions" based on stimuli or hereditary drives.[78] That trope has often been invoked to justify the exclusion of nonhuman animals from political and normative consideration; if they cannot properly respond, how can they become subjects and addressees of responsibility? Arendt partakes in that exclusion, even in her late work that establishes the world as a common stage for all living things.

The kind of agency Arendt ends up attributing to human beings in her account of self-presentation is in tension with her nonsovereign understanding of action, however. Most notably, *The Human Condition* underscores that

[74]Ibid., 32.
[75]Ibid., 36, emphasis added.
[76]Ibid., 37.
[77]Ibid., 36.
[78]Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 124–28. For the untenability of the (animal) reaction / (human) response dichotomy, see also Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 71; Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 77–78, 119–21; Wolfe, *Before the Law*, 63–72.

human beings are never fully in charge of the outcomes or meanings of their words and deeds since they always speak and act in the presence of others: "Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer."[79] Actors are sufferers in the sense that their actions always engender effects and responses that they cannot anticipate or control. In addition, actors cannot control the meanings attributed to their actions; it is the narratives that follow these actions that endow them with meaningfulness.[80] *The Human Condition* highlights the inescapable vulnerability of human beings to the words, opinions, and judgments of others, as it challenges the quasi-sovereign model of agency that peculiarly resurfaces in the anthropocentric passages of *The Life of the Mind*, which introduce us to an actor who is ("up to a point") immune to that kind of vulnerability and is (nearly) capable of mastering words and deeds, deliberately choosing what to show and what to hide, and achieving a distinctive self-presentation that more or less fits the image consciously crafted in advance.

Arendt's anthropocentric moves risk reintroducing the metaphysics she powerfully criticizes by turning to a self-present and self-aware subject preceding its appearances in the world and manipulating those appearances in accordance with its conscious intentions. Her phenomenological approach questions precisely that idea, as it suggests that there is no self-presence without self-representation, or no being prior to co-appearance and co-spectatorship, in the case of living things. It is precisely that crucial phenomenological insight that could serve as a starting point for destabilizing Arendt's human/animal hierarchy.

## 3. Phenomenology against Anthropocentrism

Arendt's main task in *The Life of the Mind* was to develop a phenomenology of *vita contemplativa*, as she imagined this work to be a companion to *The Human Condition*, which offered a phenomenology of *vita activa*.[81] While she discusses animals, they are not her key concern; she engages in what Kelly Oliver calls "animal pedagogy" by enlisting animals to make a statement about an activity (i.e., thinking) that she associates with human beings.[82] Moving beyond the authorial intentions of *The Life of the Mind*, I suggest that Arendt's phenomenological approach, prioritizing the world as a common stage of appearance for all living things, can be mobilized to question her animal/human hierarchy and rethink politics as an intra- and inter-species activity. Especially important in this regard are Arendt's arguments

[79]Arendt, *Human Condition*, 190.
[80]Ibid., 192.
[81]Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 2:701.
[82]Oliver, *Animal Lessons*, 209.

about the intrinsic connection between appearance and semblance, built-in intentionality of all appearances, and common sense as something shared by all living things.

Arendt's phenomenology is strikingly at odds with the hierarchical distinction she establishes between human "self-presentation" and animal "self-display," which casts animals as deficient forms of life incapable of "hypocrisy and pretense"—merely reacting to their environment, unable to properly respond.[83] It is impossible to uphold that conclusion when we turn to Arendt's discussion of semblance, which draws parallels between human hypocrisy and animal camouflage. Against the metaphysical disdain of appearance as mere semblance, she affirms semblance as the necessary condition of appearing in a world shared by "a plurality of sensitive creatures," each perceiving that which appears from "particular perspectives determined by location in the world as well as by particular organs of perception."[84] Her defense of semblance builds on Merleau-Ponty's argument that even an illusory perception conveys a sense of "reality" because it verifies "the belongingness of each experience to the same world, their equal power to manifest it, as *possibilities of the same world*."[85] Arendt's phenomenological affirmation of semblance takes her to the conclusion that all living things, as simultaneously subjects and objects of perception, are prone to illusions and capable of giving rise to semblances.

To illustrate this point, Arendt gives the example of animal camouflage and compares it to hypocrisy, which undercuts her claim that only human beings are capable of deliberately manipulating their appearances: "Animals are also able to produce semblances—quite a number of them can even counterfeit a physical appearance—and men and animals both possess an innate ability to manipulate appearance for the sake of deception. To 'uncover' the true identity of an animal behind its adaptive temporary color is not unlike the unmasking of the hypocrite."[86] Arendt's understanding of animal camouflage as a manipulative deception is based on Portmann's *Animal Camouflage*, which she taught in her seminar on thinking. When Portmann describes crabs camouflaging themselves by affixing to their bodies sponges cut from the small algae they collect with their pincers, he speaks of a "deliberate masquerade."[87] The disguise is "deliberate" in the sense that it is directed at a beholding eye.[88] Arendt's comparison of camouflage and hypocrisy, informed by Portmann's work, casts doubt on her assertion that animal self-display lacks the deliberate responsiveness that characterizes human self-presentation.

[83]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 36.
[84]Ibid., 38.
[85]Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 41; emphasis original.
[86]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 39.
[87]Adolf Portmann, *Animal Camouflage*, trans. A. J. Pomerans (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), 37.
[88]Ibid., 100.

What ultimately matters in display and disguise is the presupposition of being perceived by other living things and belonging to a shared perceptual field with them, and not whether appearance and semblance result from conscious choices of a self-aware subject. In fact, since phenomenology insists on the primacy of the perceptual relations, it suggests that "what exists are not separated animals" (human and nonhuman) but rather "an inter-animality."[89]

A similar conclusion arises from Arendt's phenomenological reconsideration of "intentionality," which, for Husserl, means that "no subjective act is ever without an object: though the seen tree may be an illusion, for the act of seeing it is an object nevertheless."[90] Arendt reinterprets this crucial insight, with the help of Portmann and Merleau-Ponty, in ways that destabilize the traditional subject/object divide even more radically. Adopting Portmann's view that every appearance is a "conveyance for receivers," she suggests that, just as there is a built-in objectivity in every subjective act, there is, conversely, a "built-in subjectivity" in every "appearing object."[91] With this move, Arendt dissociates "intentionality" from the premeditated goals and plans of a conscious subject, such as the one we saw in her discussion of human self-presentation. Instead, she invites us to understand intentionality as a built-in characteristic, or a necessary presupposition, of all appearances. Accordingly, we are introduced to a perceptual field marked by the continuous reversibility of subjects and objects precisely because all living things are both perceiving and perceived. This reversibility is the key idea that Arendt adopts from Merleau-Ponty's "philosophy of the flesh," which understands the world in terms of the crisscrossing or intertwining of the seer and the seen, of the touching and the tangible, of the signifier and the signified.[92] From this phenomenological standpoint, the world emerges as an in-between space that occasions intra- and interspecies forms of encounter, reciprocity, and acknowledgment among all living things as subjects and objects of perception.[93]

[89]Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 189.

[90]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 46.

[91]Ibid.

[92]Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—the Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible*, 130–55. For analyses of Merleau-Ponty's concept of "the flesh," see, among others, Judith Butler, *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 35–37; Salih Emre Gerçek, "From Body to Flesh: Lefort, Merleau-Ponty, and Democratic Indeterminacy," *European Journal of Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (October 2020): 576–78; Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 100–103.

[93]While Arendt, Merleau-Ponty, and Portmann seem to have in mind intraspecies relations and responsiveness, from a phenomenological standpoint that takes the world as a common stage of appearance for all living things, it would be problematic to rule out interspecies interactions and perceptual entanglements that

For the purpose of breaking with anthropocentrism, it is equally important to note Arendt's phenomenological understanding of the world in relation to a "common sense" shared by all living things. Her understanding of "common sense" has particularly been discussed in relation to her turn to Kant's understanding of judgment.[94] However, in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt cites not Kant but Thomas Aquinas, who in turn works with the notion of *koinē aisthēsis* in Aristotle's *De anima*, as she takes common sense as a characteristic of all living things, not just human beings. *Sensus communis* coordinates the five senses, integrates the different sensible properties (e.g., sight and taste), and allows the possibility of perceiving greenness and sweetness, for example, as the different properties of the same apple I see and taste.[95] This sixth sense "fits the sensations of my strictly private five senses . . . into a common world shared by others."[96] This commonness, or "the inter-subjectivity of the world," frees all living things from the subjectivity of their perceptions and instills in them a sense of reality arising from "a threefold commonness: the five senses, utterly different from each other, have the same object in common; members of the same species have the context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning; and all other sense-endowed beings, through perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, agree on its identity."[97] Common sense, which orients all living things in the world, serves as the ground for an embodied and intersubjective understanding of reality in Arendt's late phenomenology. Accordingly, we can quote but also revise her remarks on Kant's conception of *sensus communis* as follows: "One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one's community sense, one's *sensus communis*. But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being [a living thing]; this is one's 'cosmopolitan existence.'"[98] The Aristotelian notion of *sensus communis*, read alongside Arendt's lectures on Kant, offers a glimpse of a cosmopolitical vision in which being a "world citizen" and a "world spectator" is not limited to human beings.[99]

destabilize the sharp subject/object divide. For such possibilities, see Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

[94]Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 64–77. For a discussion of "common sense" in relation to Arendt's Kantian understanding of judgment, see, for example, Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 135, 156–63.

[95]Pavel Gregoric, *Aristotle on the Common Sense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[96]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 50.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 75.

[99]Ibid., 76.

Arendt's phenomenological reflections on semblance, intentionality, and common sense highlight the impossibility of upholding a hierarchical human/animal divide without resurrecting the metaphysics she so persuasively tears down. It also gives rise to crucial possibilities for rethinking a truly worldly politics in which all living things continuously respond to each other in their embodied interactions:

> The urge toward self-display—to respond by showing to the overwhelming effect of being shown—seems to be common to men and animals. And just as the actor depends upon stage, fellow-actors, and spectators, to make his entrance, 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 *acknowledge and recognize* its existence.[100]

The phenomenological approach reflected clearly in this passage calls into question the anthropocentric dogmas that reduce animals to reactive organisms who lack the capacity to properly respond. It challenges the assumption that animals are simply "mere life," bound to biological necessities and drives, and shows them partaking in what Bonnie Honig, following Derrida, calls "more life," or "surplus life" (*sur-vivance*), which exceeds the functionalist demands of life preservation.[101] Revolving around the key premise that every appearance is a response "to the overwhelming effect of being shown," Arendt's phenomenology invites us to reconsider acknowledgment and recognition as intra- and interspecies forms of response on the worldly stage shared by all living things.

## 4. A Fable in Which Animals Claim a Right to Have Rights

I consider the broader political stakes of this invitation by turning to Arendt's account of statelessness in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her famous call for "a right to have rights," and her effort to rethink personhood as an artificial mask that can transform a living being into a rights-bearing subject. In her reflections on the plight of the stateless during the first half of the twentieth century, Arendt makes a startling remark about the philanthropic organizations established to provide humanitarian relief to refugees: "The groups they formed, the declarations they issued, showed an *uncanny similarity* in language and composition to that of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals."[102] She does not say much about this "uncanny similarity," but what seems to bring these two forms of advocacy together, from her

[100]Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 21–22, emphasis added.

[101]See Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 10. On "mere" and "more life," see also Lida Maxwell, "Queer/Love/Bird Extinction: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as a Work of Love," *Political Theory* 45, no. 5 (2017): 682–704.

[102]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 292, emphasis added.

perspective, is the fact that both extended the boundaries of moral community by emphasizing the shared capacity to feel pain as the ground of a compassionate obligation to relieve the suffering of fellow sentient beings. With that focus, they construed the problem at stake narrowly—i.e., protection from cruelty and provision of necessary sustenance—and overlooked broader questions of justice.[103]

Despite significant changes in these two areas of advocacy, refugees who are de facto stateless and nonhuman animals continue to find themselves in a condition of rightlessness. They are both denied what Arendt calls "a right to have rights," which entails, among other things, a right to legal personhood, "a right to belong to some kind of organized community," and a right to have a "place on earth."[104] Deprived of legal and political standing, both groups find themselves subject to arbitrary forms of violence with impunity and become dependent on the goodwill of compassionate others. I briefly address one key dimension of "a right to have rights"—the right to personhood—to clarify the distinctive contributions that an Arendtian phenomenological approach can make to the ongoing debates on animal rights.[105]

For the most part, the problem of animal rightlessness continues to elicit a moral response centered on the compassionate obligation to relieve suffering. While this approach has been important for the codification of laws that limit cruelty against animals, it fails to address various forms of domination, exploitation, and captivity that do not involve the infliction of pain.[106] More recently, a more promising path has been taken by scholars and advocates who call for animal rights by transforming the legal status of animals from "property" to "persons." The term "person," often used interchangeably with the term "human" in everyday language, has a specific juridical sense, as it designates a status reserved for subjects recognized by law as rights-bearing entities. In their arguments for animal personhood and rights, scholars and advocates have drawn attention to the innate capacities that animals share

[103]For a more detailed discussion of the similarities between these two forms of advocacy and the limitations of a humanitarian approach centered on compassion, see Ayten Gündogdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 75–81.

[104]Ibid., 297, 293.

[105]Alastair Hunt has offered insightful readings of Arendt in relation to animal rights in several works; see, for example, "The Rights of the Infinite," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 223–51; "Just Animals," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, no. 2 (2016): 231–46; "Of Whom?," in *The Right to Have Rights*, ed. Stephanie DeGooyer et al. (London: Verso, 2018). Hunt focuses on Arendt's critique of human rights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; my goal is to rethink that critique in light of the phenomenology of living things developed in *The Life of the Mind*.

[106]See Gary L. Francione, *Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 38–41; Donaldson and Kymlicka, *Zoopolis*, 3–4; Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animals and Disability Liberation* (New York: New Press, 2017), 146.

with human beings, emphasizing especially consciousness and sentience.[107] This model confounds equality with sameness, however, and fails to recognize animals as rights-holders in their own terms. This assimilationist reasoning has led to the privileging of animal lives that are "taxonomically closer"[108] to human beings, as illustrated by the Great Ape Project, which includes chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans alongside human beings in "the community of equals."[109] But as Catharine MacKinnon cogently asks, "Why should animals have to measure up to humans' standards for humanity before their existence counts?"[110]

Given that the discourse of animal rights and personhood has the risk of substituting sameness for equality and creating new hierarchies, some critics have kept their distance from a juridical approach and proposed instead ethical frameworks attentive to alterity, embodied vulnerability, and incalculable demands of justice.[111] As valuable as these frameworks have been for understanding the problems with dominant approaches to animal rightlessness, they have failed to address what is politically needed to change the structural conditions that maintain human domination over animals.[112] Additionally, as Arendt underscores, compassion, love, and goodwill are capricious sentiments, with their own convoluted power dynamics. The dependence of the stateless on "the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy" or the "incalculable grace of love," for example, was part and parcel of their rightlessness.[113] The limitations of such ethical gestures take Arendt to an insistence on the need for equalization in and through law: "For as much as the eternal insufficiency of law relegates man to the compassion of his fellow man, all the less can one demand of him that he replace the law with compassion."[114]

[107]Francione, *Animals as Persons*; Steven M. Wise, "Animal Rights, One Step at a Time," in *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*, ed. Cass Sunstein and Martha Nussbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 19–50; Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 1–33.

[108]Wise, "Animal Rights," 33.

[109]"A Declaration on Great Apes," in *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity*, ed. Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), 4–7. For the ableist assumptions underlying this effort, see Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 146.

[110]Catharine MacKinnon, "Of Mice and Men: A Feminist Fragment on Animal Rights," in Sunstein and Nussbaum, *Animal Rights*, 267.

[111]Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 73–75; Oliver, *Animal Lessons*, 40–48; Wolfe, *Before the Law*, 11–20. All three thinkers, in different ways, build on Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

[112]For the limitations of ethical responses, see, for example, Matthew Calarco, *Thinking through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 45–46; Krause, "Political Respect for Nature," 241, 252–58; MacKinnon, "Of Mice and Men," 272.

[113]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 301.

[114]Arendt, "Guests from No-Man's Land," in *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 212.

Arendt's worldly phenomenology of living things allows us to rethink animal rights beyond the impasses of this existing debate. Against the metaphysical move to turn inward and ground rights in an innate property that renders animals and humans similar, an Arendtian approach invites us to stay on the surface and rethink equality in the light of, not in spite of, plurality, understood in terms of "the twofold character of equality and distinction."[115] It also cautions against such a metaphysical move because of the tendency to substitute a metaphysical foundation for a political guarantee. Confronted with the rightlessness of the stateless, Arendt highlights the political inefficacy, even futility, of such foundations, and insists instead on the need for political practices and institutional guarantees of intersubjective recognition to achieve equalization among those who are otherwise unequal: "We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights."[116]

If equality is not inherently given, it cannot be taken for granted, and needs to be established and maintained by legal and political guarantees. The right to personhood is one such important guarantee that is necessary, though never sufficient on its own, to stand before the law and make rights claims. Arendt helps us think about this right in political terms, as she approaches it phenomenologically in works such as *On Revolution*. Recalling the origins of the term "person" in Latin *persona*, which denotes "the mask ancient actors used to wear in a play," she underscores that it was the Romans who transposed this theatrical term to the legal domain and established a distinction between the mere fact of humanness and the artificial status of personhood that is made and unmade by law.[117] Linking *persona* to *per-sonare*, which means to sound through, Arendt invites us to understand personhood as a legal mask that allows one's voice to be heard.[118] In emphasizing the artificialness of personhood as a mask that allows visibility and audibility before the law, she breaks with a metaphysics of the person that seeks a real or natural being antecedent to legal relations and whose inherent properties (e.g., reason, dignity, autonomy) ground rights;[119] it is precisely this problematic metaphysics that has resurfaced within the arguments for animal rights, as discussed earlier.

Arendt's phenomenological approach helps us dissociate personhood from humanness and rethink it beyond the species boundary. If who we recognize

[115]Arendt, *Human Condition*, 175.

[116]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 301. I discuss elsewhere how Arendt's declaration of "a right to have rights" parts with metaphysical quests for foundations and draws attention instead to the political practices of founding human rights; see Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights*, 168–73.

[117]Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 106.

[118]Ibid., 106, 293n.

[119]For the classic critique of the metaphysics of personhood, see John Dewey, "The Historic Background of Corporate Legal Personality," *Yale Law Journal* 35, no. 6 (1926): 655–73.

as subjects entitled to rights depends ultimately on a political judgment rather than an intrinsic property and if personhood is not inherently given but artificially created by law, then there is no reason why animals cannot be recognized as "persons"—unless we, as "humans," judge on the basis of a speciesist ideology within which "nonhumans" are by default "property."

Given the hold of anthropocentrism on our political imagination, rethinking our fundamental assumptions about animals requires nothing less than a fabulation, to recall the beginning of this article, which consists of representative practices that can animate what is taken to be a reactive mechanism, help us see it anew in its multitudinous worldly relations and interactions, and establish it as a subject entitled to political and normative consideration. Arendt's worldly phenomenology, once we resist her anthropocentrism, transfigures our political imagination in such a fashion by recasting animals as embodied living things with whom we share the world as a stage of co-appearance and co-spectatorship. There is also a fabular dimension to her dramaturgical understanding of personhood as *persona*, or as a mask that animates actors with certain capacities and rights, arranges their roles and relationships on a juridico-political stage, and authorizes them to press claims.

This dimension urges us to rethink *persona* in relation to *prosopopoeia*, or personification, a figure of speech that entails "making a thing act like a person as a fiction or disguise."[120] As a figurative technique that animates entities deemed to be deprived of the capacity for action and speech (those who are nonhuman, inanimate, absent, dead, or imaginary), *prosopopoeia* is a form of representation that is not mimetic (e.g., duplicating that which already exists) but rather generative in the sense that it transforms existing conceptions of persons, rights, capacities, and responsibilities by destabilizing the instituted divides between human and animal, animate and inanimate, and living and dead.[121] Personhood operates similarly; as Arendt reminds us, we do not enter a court of law in our natural or given state but rather as persons artificially endowed by law with certain rights, capacities, and responsibilities.[122]

Read in this way, Arendt's famous proposal for "a right to have rights," declared in response to the problem of statelessness, suggests that rights should no longer be guarded as the exclusive property of those who

[120]Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 12.

[121]For an account of representation that attends to its performative effects, see Lisa Disch, "Ecological Democracy and the Co-participation of Things," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. Teena Gabrielson et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 624–40.

[122]Arendt, *On Revolution*, 107. For a detailed account of this alternative conception of personhood, see Gündoğdu, "At the Margins of Personhood: Rethinking Law and Life beyond the Impasses of Biopolitics," *Constellations* 28, no. 4 (2021): 570–87.

conform to a certain yardstick of humanity. They should instead be "unlock [ed] from reification" so that they can become truly universal—accessible to "all of society's objects and untouchables," in the words of Patricia Williams, to all those buried in "the shrouds of inanimate object-status."[123] If there still remains the question of what entitles all those who are currently relegated to a condition of rightlessness to be rights-bearing persons, we can respond that it is nothing more, and nothing less, than a political recognition of our worldliness—the fact that we all share a world in which we appear, interact with, and respond to each other in ways that cross species boundaries and that it is these interactions that guarantee the reality of the world for all of us and that cultivate the condition of plurality.

[123]Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 165. Williams draws on Christopher Stone's classic argument for recognizing nonnatural entities as persons entitled to rights; see "Should Trees Have Standing—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects," *Southern California Law Review* 45, no. 2 (1972): 450–501. While my focus here is on nonhuman animals, Arendt's phenomenological understanding of personhood can also be helpful for rethinking rights in relation to nonhuman nature more broadly since it does not rely on arbitrary criteria such as "sentience." Even Donaldson and Kymlicka, who raise concerns about the use of such criteria and call for a political approach centered on intersubjective recognition, invoke "sentience" as they draw a distinction between animals as rights-bearing "persons" and nonsentient natural entities (e.g., ecosystem) as rightless "things." See *Zoopolis*, 36. For an alternative approach that calls for political rights and representation for nonhuman nature (including nonhuman animals), see Sharon R. Krause, *Eco-emancipation: An Earthly Politics of Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).