Vorwort

I did not go looking for Arendt’s voice. An unexpected gift from Germany, from the woman who was my intellectual mentor in Gymnasium, brought five CDs of interviews, award speeches and lectures, brought Hannah Arendt’s voice across the ocean and across more than five decades into my living room last summer. It was a surprise to hear Arendt’s voice after so many years of reading her texts, mostly in English translation and occasionally in German. It was a surprise to have that powerful voice suddenly flow through my living room, through the windows and out into the streets of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. What a gift this is that resurrects the dead teacher in your own living room. Hannah Arendt died in 1976 when she was 70 and I was 6, and since 1989 when I first saw that well-known copy of *The Human Condition* floating across the campus of Reed College under the arms of students, Arendt has been with me. I found Arendt’s books when I came to America. Arendt’s voice found me after 20 years of living here.

Confronting aural malaise

Arendt’s voice arrived at a good time when I had largely despaired of everyday political speech. I noticed that I was doing more than listening to what Arendt said. I was listening to get a sense of her person and listening to fill 20 years of interpretive gaps. Along the way, I realized that Arendt offers not just arguments but an important example of the power and political significance of reasoned speech. I confess that I don’t like listening to people very much these days. What they say is either too flimsy or
too dense to befriend my mind. This is bad news for a professional political theorist: I need to listen to political speech and I need to make sense of it. Not wanting to listen to political speech is itself a reaction, a reaction to the normalization of lies, the banalization of crime, the glorification of hyperbole, and unsatisfactory legalistic speech. All of these combine to heighten my resistance to speech I no longer perceive to be meaningful or communicative. And yet I am keenly interested in politics.

This aural malaise, the frequent desire to turn off the radio when certain voices chime in, is not just picky unwillingness to listen to people with whom I disagree, but rather reflects my intuition that listening to too much nonsense will drive me to insanity and despair. Sanity is exactly what I got from listening to Arendt. In her voice there is earnest engagement, knowledge, and patient development of thought. Here is a person who speaks with moral authority and without dogmatism. Arendt violates several rules of American political speech without even knowing it: without hurry she sorts out the complex, without defensiveness she connects the abstract to daily life, and without manipulation of others she pursues her own understanding. In our political culture everything must be said easily and quickly, nothing may be complicated. Complexity and abstraction count as signs of the confused mind belonging to a person who simply doesn’t get it. In this culture, hearing the voice of Hannah Arendt is a breath of fresh air.

Of course it’s true that being a professor of political theory only serves to exacerbate my listening sensitivities. It is one thing to encounter statements that could bear more reflection in the classroom because reflection and critical examination of thought are the reasons we come together there. It is another thing to listen to the radio or to hear voices on television where no response is possible, where all interventions into the discussion are futile even if screamed. My mind rebels against the overload of nonsense and the overstimulation of the constant dribble of superficial political speech with its various
instrumental aims: vote for me, give me your dollar, support my campaign, and ultimately, obey. By contrast, to listen to Arendt I have the sense that my mind is free to think its own thoughts, that I don’t have to unravel the illogic or bizarreness of what I hear, or rage against ill-chosen words and displaced concepts. To listen to Arendt is to understand the full importance of reasoned speech, speech that has no other aim than to further understanding and thereby perhaps to indicate a common ground from which the discussion can continue or from which action can be taken. To listen to Arendt is to regain hope as a political theorist and to be re-energized to defend thought.

**How she sounds: German**

Arendt, of course, had to establish an entire new existence when she fled Europe in the 1940s and arrived in America with few resources and scant English-language skills. Her reflections on the German mother tongue (*Muttersprache*) as her home will be familiar to her readers. What the reader cannot hear is the extent to which Arendt is an ascendant master of the German language. Her speaking brings clarity, order and urgency to thought. In German, idiomatic speech and poetic resonance are hardwired into the pathways of her thinking.

She speaks clearly, slowly; she articulates well and has excellent timing. Some of her formulations, even in an informal interview, are stunning and publication quality. There is something proud in this command of language that coincides with the command of thought. Arendt’s voice conveys a strong moral authority without hype or overstatement. There is no awkwardness. Her clear-cut sentences are punctuated not only by their structure but by her sharp pronunciation of words. Arendt speaks very precise and clear High German (*Hochdeutsch*) with several typically northern German pronunciations such as a sharp ST, as opposed to the more common SCHT sound used by speakers when pronouncing words beginning with ST. The sharpness of this ST is in many ways expressive of the overall quality of
her language. The ST stands out: in German the classic sharp ST pronunciation is encapsulated in the saying “ein spitzer STein” meaning a sharp stone. Arendt’s pronunciations are just that, the sharp edge of a hard rock.

PappenSTiel (figurative expression: a trivial thing)
Politisch STeril (politically sterile)
WeltverluST (loss of world)
STalin
STrophen (stanza or verse)

Because Arendt’s German is of surgical precision, the listener more easily follows her into arguments and discussions of concepts. Her language offers no resistance, only clarity. Listening to her is gratifying because her clear mastery of the language lets the mind rest.

It is also easy to settle into listening to Arendt because she is so confident. It is easy to recognize her voice as that of an adult. Besides this power one can also find comfort there, the comfort of a person who has made thinking out loud her life’s work. In her interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt is so comfortable that she later admitted to giving away more than she wanted to because she found Gaus to be such an engaging person. In this interview, Gaus, a younger man with a gentle yet very direct voice, asks Arendt about the exceptionality of being a woman philosopher. Arendt takes control of the interview by rejecting the title of philosopher and by identifying herself as a political theorist. This is a minute yet significant example of her persistent patience with clarifications and distinctions. She rejects the interviewer’s question and thus begins their conversation.
The interview is perhaps an unusual format for Arendt but it is the one—when compared to speeches and lectures—in which she is most accessible. The interview conversation is relaxed and accompanied by an environment of sound that includes the bubbling of mineral water and the lighting of cigarettes. There is something intimate in hearing these sounds beyond the voice, the sense of the everyday things we all do. Arendt’s voice itself varies. As she begins the interview, it sounds warm, gravelly, wise but modest. As the interview progresses, it is possible to hear the strain, her cough, and a roughness. And yet throughout, Arendt sounds very down-to-earth, very competent, and very comfortable. You can sit with her. You can talk with her.

She is charming at moments and she laughs about others and herself. One story she recounts involves a police officer in Nazi Germany who arrested her and was puzzled because he couldn’t in his mind categorize her as a criminal. She admits to both lying and trusting him. In a situation of great danger, when Arendt faced the consequences of doing research for a Zionist organization, she trusted what she called an open and honest face, and giving up the chance to be defended by a lawyer, entrusted her well-being to the police officer who seemed to like her so much that he couldn’t make sense of arresting her. When Arendt tells such stories, one has a sense of her formidable but also kind presence. She is a person who doesn’t shy away from encounters with others, whatever the situation.

In other words, Arendt is profoundly present in her speaking. She is fluently responsive to the questions of the interviewer without letting those questions dictate her response. She pounds the table at times, audibly puncturing her sentences and making the glasses jump and clink. The special combination of precision, presence, and comfort is endearing. Her voice draws you in because she stands and speaks on the ground of a recognizably shared experience, because she speaks from her own position without
pretense, and because her authority derives neither from position nor from desire to overpower the listener.

**How she sounds:** English

There is an exceptional moment in these recordings when Arendt recites poetry in English, when she breaks from German to read a poem by Algernon Charles Swinburne, the Victorian poet. This reading jolts the listener from the smooth and crystal-clear German to the heavily accented, stereotypically German-Jewish English. This is an unsettling moment. The discontinuity between Arendt’s speech in German and the sound of her voice in English is remarkable. A non-German speaker cannot know the extent to which Arendt is a master of her own language and only a very intelligent speaker of English, a language that became important in her life in her 30s. Arendt sounds funny reading poetry in English, almost a bit ridiculous compared with her powerful voice in German. This is an important comparative moment. She has a power in German that is so smooth and in English she sounds a little clumsy and a little cute. In English, her accent compromises her message by pointing to her person in a categorical or stereotypical manner, the stereotype of an old German woman speaking English.

In German, her voice does not distract from her message; it intensifies everything and it goes directly to the ear without circling around her person. Swinburne’s poem, *The Proserpine*, makes an appearance in her lecture on Bertolt Brecht. She reads:

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Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.
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This short passage is, with the exception of a few untranslated political sayings, the only time we hear Arendt speaking English. Her rhythm is impeccable. She gets the lines just right. Nonetheless, the reading of this poem momentarily ruptures the enthusiastic atmosphere and the driving speech about Brecht’s life and work. This point is not irrelevant. Listening to her speak English, we are distracted by non-standard pronunciation and noticeable foreignness. We react to the accent, and the accent distresses from what the person is saying by taking us into our own prejudice.

Additionally, German is a phonetic language and clarity enjoys high status in it. In German, there are no confusions about pronunciation. The extent to which this is true can barely be imagined by English speakers who routinely encounter multiple pronunciations and persistent insecurities. Thus her switch between German and English not merely presents the contrast between first language and later-acquired language, but also between two relationships to the sound of words.

The response above is mine, and, of course, I hear Arendt in a particular way by virtue of being bilingual and having grown up in Germany. An American friend of mine who largely shares my politics, my aesthetics, and my overall sensibilities had an entirely different response to hearing Arendt recite this section of Swinburne’s *Proserpine*. To his well-read American English-speaking ear, hearing Arendt in English produced an unexpected effect: he thought she sounded more fluid and gentle. This may be in part because German typically sounds harsh to Americans in a way that it certainly doesn’t sound harsh to Germans. In Arendt’s voice he heard dignity, a raspy, tough old lady who, again, sounds better in English simply because English doesn’t sound as harsh as German to him. Like me, he heard that she was comfortable enough in the language to be a more than effective reader. Beyond effectivity, she got the rhythm and feeling right, and her voice expressed the sadness of the poem. He noticed her deliberate spacing at the very end when she read “. . . somewhere [pause] safe [pause] to sea.” Unlike
me, he concluded that Arendt’s reading of this famous poem and often-quoted passage showed that she was at home in English.

**The importance of reasoned speech**

Arendt has said that her home is in the German language and not in Germany. The heightened importance of language for her is evident at every turn. For a political theorist, clarity about the world demands precise language. Clarity and precision are thus the foundations of political understanding and the even more basic ability to connect with others. We need clear and honest language in order to be at home in the world with each other. Arendt’s speech is always very concrete. She does not make use of jargon or terminology. Once in a while, a small Latin saying or a brief poem make it into her argument, but she remains accessible in a way that most theorists and philosophers don’t seem even to strive for. These multiple levels of earnest engagement of thought through language are especially rewarding in German. In German, one would not accuse Arendt of excessive abstraction, vague passages, or poetic excess. She is clear and famously so.

Arendt herself had plenty to say about language, speaking and listening. In her "Laudatio for Karl Jaspers" in 1958, Arendt’s glowing praise for Jaspers, her teacher, highlights the space of reason and freedom he created in discussion with others. She connects the quality of his speaking to his marriage with a woman who is his equal and with whom a world in miniature could emerge. Their relationship is the lifelong, daily practice of speaking and listening thought. Listening, being precise, and, as Arendt puts it so nicely, “inviting the unsaid into the space of discussion” [my translation] defines Jaspers’ intellectual life. *To be at home* is thus about speaking and hearing. Jaspers, Arendt claims, is at home in a world of speaking and listening thought. This whole person orientation to discussion extends beyond
what we might today, in a more formal sense, understand as the political. One may speak in ways that are political even when the subject matter is not political per se.

Arendt acknowledges and honors speaking and listening in her reconstruction of the intellectual life of Jaspers. To Jaspers she attributes the ability of revealing what exists in darkness. He brought the light of understanding. She admires his constant openness to the world, a world from which he never withdrew even during the Nazi period. The reasoned speech of Jaspers, Arendt argued, created a space of freedom. Jaspers was never alone in this space, but while many visited, few lived there. In his passion for light, Arendt says that her teacher literally glowed out of the darkness. Freedom consisted in listening and precisely enunciating, in treating a convention as such, and in ultimately trusting the humanity of others, i.e., their reason. This commitment to reasoned speech and understanding, something Arendt thematizes as light, implies an ongoing connection to the world and the preservation of the ability to care and worry about things.

**What we can take away from hearing her voice**

Listening to Arendt’s voice, in combination with her political theory statements, yields several important insights. In her speaking, Arendt enacts what she argues is critical to political life when she writes. In her energetic voice she expresses care for her own thought, care for the listener, and care for the world between and around them. In speaking, she portrays the sheer joy of coming together with others and of entering the world by both speaking and acting in order to begin the new. To hear Arendt speak is to enter a world in which understanding builds connections between people and lies are understood not only as fabrications but also as destructive of the truth. All facts, she argues, appear in a particular context. This context is like a fabric. A lie tears a hole in that fabric. Historians are people who know how to deal with such holes, and, as long as the context remains, it’s fairly easy for them to discover the
lie. Yet the lies of others are not her most urgent worry. Misleading oneself is the most dangerous form of lying, a form of cheating oneself. Arendt prefers the conscious liar to the one who has cheated himself because the first kind of liar still knows the difference between the truth and the lie. In this sense, she claims that the damage of such a lie to the world is not final. And, in one of her most striking statements, she says that truth finds refuge in liars who do not lie to themselves.

I cannot help but connect these insights to a sense of sanity. Sanity is not a term Arendt uses but it is a term that comes to mind for a person living in a country wracked by much empty speech and much mental suffering. Arendt can offer insights into this mental malaise beyond the aural malaise. The infinite plurality of ungrounded speech and of lying means that that one can make up a hundred thousand versions of the truth. Arendt says as much by quoting Michel de Montaigne:

"Le révers de la verité a cent milles figures et un champs infini." This mendacious plurality is surely a threat to our collective sense of safety and meaning. But while the power of the lie is a destructive one, the needs of politics are constructive. Arendt: “Creating Potemkin villages will not create real villages.”

So the lie represents a double deprivation within the political realm. It deprives us of what Arendt calls “the stabilizing power of the real” (my translation) and the constructive power of responding to real needs. Arendt’s approach to politics is one that holds the mind and the world together. In her voice these two are inseparable and they open a space into which the listener can safely and generatively enter. She is a presence whose ongoing activity affirms the stability of facts we have inherited from the past. The sound of Arendt’s voice stands in contrast to the degraded state of public speech in our time.

But Arendt is not about the past. Her temporal orientation to the world values a shared presence and an open future, the future of unforeseeable actions and the interactions of those present now. It is
because the textual and historical (factual) past is so solid in Arendt’s mind that she is able to speak to
the present. There is no backlog here, no confusion, no cynicism, nothing that would hinder Arendt or
those who enter into conversation with her from engaging in reasoned speech in the present, reasoned
speech that itself stabilizes our sense of reality and creates a sense of home within it. The opposite of
this is something called Bodenlosigkeit (the absence of a foundation). We can speak of claims in terms
of being bodenlos as in a baseless accusation, but the more important implication regards the psycho-
political well-being of people, who as a fundamental requirement need a place to stand in order to be
able to think. The relationship between truth and mental health could not be more obvious here. What
is less obvious is the extent of dedication to and comfort with reasoned speech that holding mind and
world together requires on a daily basis.

If Arendt sometimes sounds hard or very direct, we have to ask ourselves when it was we began to feel
uncomfortable with uncompromising clarity and uncomfortable facts. Arendt suggests that we need to
lean into the things we do not understand and to confront the things we don't like. It is this she also
admires in her teacher, Jaspers: a life lived in the freedom and sanity of reasoned speech. By
implication, we need to change our definition of political theory as well as to reconsider the political
theorist. The theorist is prior to the text: it is not Arendt’s writing that refuses to let heaven and earth
fall away from each other but her daily practice of thinking and her commitment to understanding. It is
such an understanding person who writes those texts we enshrine. The thinking speaker is prior to the
text in both time and meaning. As a political theorist, Arendt uses her entire person to make sense of
the world. This should come as no surprise. A political theorist is by definition an irreducible thinker
who must begin at starting points that are clearly subjective and may appear random to others and who
must proceed by a method nobody can define. A political theorist, thus, is much more than a set of
articulated arguments, developed implications, and appropriate citations. With a theorist like Arendt
we would likewise do well to forget disciplinarity. She stands there and thinks, and because of this, a space opens up and you can stand next to her.

But you will be forced to stand alone. You cannot embrace her voice as you do her book in that very physical, hermeneutic circle every reader forms: head, arms, hands, book, and back again. In hearing her voice, you will be confronted by her and it will be more obvious when you use her words as your own. You cannot own them as you do in writing a text. Arendt stands there and we stand here. Hearing her voice redefines the relationship between political theorist and the one who would learn from her. What we can learn from Arendt is to take responsibility for our own desire to understand. We can remind ourselves that we are part of a fabric of a spoken world and that we must be concerned for the quality and the integrity of that fabric. In part, this demands that we both practice and expect speech that is uncorrupted by ulterior motives. This challenge may inspire or antagonize us, especially professional thinkers who have mastered jumping through hoops. So, having heard Arendt, I have been freed from a certain mysterious attachment to her texts and challenged to respond, uncompromisingly, with reasoned speech from my own location.

In Arendt’s speaking we can also find a commitment to the public, a public about which she claims the contemporary person is largely only suspicious. In this suspicion we lost several sources of groundedness—the stability of facts inherited from the past, a shared sense of truth, and a fulfillment of the person in the space of appearances. We lost them all at once and, for Arendt, it is only Jaspers whose commitment to holding on to the world and saying yes to the public offers a lived example of the importance of Gegenwärtigkeit. This term is not adequately translated by the English word presence. It is better described as the quality of being present. It is Jaspers who has a passion for the public, for a constantly speaking and listening form of thought in which he is at home and in which he provides space
for other people to enter into humanitas. To create a space where humanitas can appear in its pure form, a realm of speech in which we listen precisely, are patient and, as Arendt claims Jaspers did, “tempt the unspoken into the realm of speech.”

This spatial emphasis in her reading of Jaspers is perhaps one of the most important points that Arendt develops and that allows her to specifically reflect on speaking and listening. While she praises Brecht’s earthy and compassionate love of life in the world and Heidegger’s ability to think things rather than to think about them, in hearing her voice it is clear that she ultimately remains a student and a friend of Jaspers, committed to the public and the speaking and listening that live there. It is notable in this context that as much as she praises the paradigmatic shift that came about with Heidegger’s engagement with and closure of an era of philosophy, that his withdrawal from the life of the public is not at home in Arendt’s embrace of it. To have withdrawn from the public is to run the danger of being without experiences, and to be without experiences exposes us to the danger of being duped. Unlike for de Tocqueville, for Jaspers the public is not the source of the mediocre. We need the public and we need to hold on to the world, thus our only choice is to say yes to the public. A philosopher must embrace the world. And, like politics, philosophy is everybody’s business and, therefore, belongs in the public realm.

It is difficult in our time to say yes to the public and indeed we often design our lives to avoid it. When Arendt says that she experienced joy in hearing German spoken on the street after fifteen years in America, she already takes for granted what we no longer can, namely, that there are people on the street let alone people speaking. It will be difficult for us to reconstruct that space of humanitas without places of daily encounter and engagement. Arendt reminds us that freedom is more than independence. The political is something so daily for her, so beyond and prior to institutions and
formalities. The political is a quality, a quality of thought and speech, a quality of how we relate to a shared world with a will to understand and a sense of responsibility. Arendt cannot and will not tell us what to do. There is nothing we can check off the list, and perhaps this is the more important lesson of hearing the recordings of the several events, an interview, three lectures, and three portraits of other thinkers. It is the how of doing things, a quality of how one lives with independent thinking as well as with connecting to others. It is implicitly a life full of judgments we cannot avoid but also a life full of forgiveness and compassion. This life one hears in Arendt’s voice is full of thought alone and conversations with others, full of watchfulness and also of action. Even if no one doubts that the status of truth in politics has never been high, we are not excused from bringing our entire person to the project of telling stories about this world that will allow us to live in it. We cannot afford, as she says, “to treat uncomfortable facts as if they were not facts but matters about which one might have one or another opinion.”

If we are suspicious of the public, then we are also suspicious of the personal or subjective. This is problematic because each one of us has only her own person in which to reason, through which to think, and out of which to speak. In this sense Arendt demands that we think two thoughts at the same time: saying yes to the public and saying yes to the individual. The alienation that results from a suspicious distance from both the public and the subject cannot but harm our speaking and listening skills. The desire for reasonable politics thus calls on us to patiently hone and continually practice the skills of speaking and listening, skills that Arendt praises in Jaspers, skills that open a space into which others can enter. Radical individualism works against these skills in a variety of ways. The most fundamental and threatening of which is the basic assumption that the other person merely represents a distraction, a limitation of personal freedom, or the threat of coercion.