PRACTICAL WISDOM (*PHRONĒSIS*) AND HERMENEUTICAL POLITICS

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KEY CONCEPTS

Phronēsis; practical wisdom; hermeneutical politics; Aristotle; Gadamer; Arendt

ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the implications of Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) for ethical and political life in contemporary societies – especially pluralist and divided societies.[1] The argument starts with a brief reconstruction of this well-known Aristotelian concept (section 1) and then moves to its critical appropriation by two prominent contemporary thinkers. In section 2 it is argued that Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is deeply influenced by the concept of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), and that this influence has implications for the way he interprets contemporary politics – especially a scientifically-steered politics that follows the recipe of a scientific method rather than to seek a more practically wise concept of truth. Gadamer's work provides a fitting departure point for the unique political theory of Hannah Arendt (section 3) – especially the distinction she makes between an empirical and hermeneutical politics. It is additionally argued that this latter concept of Arendt, also being influenced by the Aristotelian tradition of *phronēsis*, is taken further in her study of truth and politics and its implications for concepts such as freedom, action, history, and language.

1   For an earlier version of this contribution, see my inaugural lecture at the University of the Free State (Duvenage 2013).

1. ARISTOTLE AND THE CONCEPT OF PRACTICAL WISDOM (PHRONĒSIS)

A brief discussion of Aristotle's broad philosophy is helpful as a background to his concept of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). In this regard Aristotle's distinction between the appearance of things (*phainomena*) and the endoxic method is important. In his *Metaphysics* (1948: 982b12) Aristotle states: "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now and at first began to philosophise; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters..." Thus we reflect because we come to stand with wonder in the face of reality in her rich variety, and we are addressed by it. Wonder, awe, and receptivity are the bases of our reflexion about the cosmos and our place in it. It is this haunting wonder (*aporiai)* that calls, lures and seduces us to philosophise. It is only in a next step that this wonderment is systematically organised – the endoxic method. According to this method we gather common opinions (*doxa*) about that which fills us in the first place with awe. The common opinions about phenomena are obviously not unanimous – because they are based on wonderment. Therefore our everyday opinions (*endoxa*) must not only be interpreted systematically but also critically questioned.[2]

From this more general discussion of Aristotle's philosophy it is now possible to move to the type of person that embodies the principles of wonderment and the endoxic method. The sketch of such a person, the practically wise person (*phronimon*), was already a theme for Aristotle's predecessors. Socrates understands *phronēsis* as being active in dialogue or rhetoric which can lead one to the good. Plato places in a typical manner all true knowledge of the human good (*phronēsis* and *sophia*) in the absolute good. In the *Phaedo* and other dialogues he describes *phronēsis* as the ability to think about the form – where human action is directed on the fulfilment of the good as the highest human ideal. Aristotle, though, does not share Plato's description of the practically wise person as striving for the absolute good. He (Aristotle 2009: 1096b-27-29) states: "...it is [thus] clear that the good would not be something common, universal and one. For if that were the case, it would not be spoken of in all categories, but in one alone." Here Aristotle is nearer to Socrates. Practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is thus not "general knowledge" of the good in itself or of being in its general form (*eidos*). It is rather concerned with the human existential goal to obtain knowledge or insight of the happy or flourishing life (*eudaimonia*). In Gadamer's language this is moral knowledge. In this regard human virtues, moral as well as intellectual, play an important role. In distinction to the animal, human beings can succeed or fail in fulfilling virtuous norms such as courage and temperance – these are virtues which are especially cultivated through social interaction, community, and specifically friendship. Of all the virtues the intellectual

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2   The interpretation of Aristotle here is influenced by Shields (2008: section 3).

virtues are of special import – with *phronēsis* playing a mediating role between scientific-theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) and practical knowledge (*techne*).[3]

1.1. Phronēsis as intellectual virtue

In the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle (2009: 1139b18-1141b27) divides the intellectual virtues and the mediating role of *phronēsis* in the following way:

a.   In the first place *epistēmē* is scientific knowledge, universal, context-independent and based on general analytical rationality. Together with the other two virtues in this group, namely wisdom (*sophia*) and intuition (*nous*) scientific knowledge constitutes theoretical knowledge, although there are also important differences of nuance between these three virtues.

b.   In the case of practical knowledge (*techne*) we are dealing with skilfulness, art (*poiēsis*) and the technical. This is pragmatic, contingent and context-dependent knowledge obtained through the experience of production. It is further based on practical, instrumental rationality and works with a conscious goal – for example, to manufacture a chair or to stage a theatre production successfully.

c.   As stated, *phronēsis* mediates between scientific (*episteme*) and artistic-technical knowledge (*poiēsis*) – as discussed under (a) and (b) – and is ethically existentially orientated. It concerns the practical judgement of which virtues and values are at stake in a given context in order to ensure that ethical decisions are made on the basis of the relevant scientific and technical knowledge.

In order to appreciate the mediating role of *phronēsis*, it is important to be clear how it differs from scientific-theoretical knowledge [(a) above] and practical-technical knowledge [(b) above]. In the first place, scientific-theoretical knowledge [(a) above] is universally necessary knowledge, while the human praxis is characterised by contingency and difference.[4] Aristotle (2009: 1141b15) writes: "And prudence is not concerned with universals alone but must also be acquainted with the particulars: it is bound up with action, and action concerns the particulars."[5] Secondly, scientific-theoretical knowledge is dependent on deductive conclusions about sense observations, which are made on the basis of universally legitimate rules. Thirdly, the subject and the object are separated in the process of scientific-theoretical knowledge production in so far as the observing subject is neutrally situated over against the observed object, for example, the scientist looking at something under a microscope (Gadamer 1975a: 297; 2004: 312). *Phronēsis*, though, is not to force

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3   On the importance of the theoretical knowledge, see Goosen (2011).
4   See Aristotle (2009: 1139b24-25): "...what is knowable scientifically exists of necessity. Therefore it is eternal..." Aristotle, though, asks whether scientific knowledge, with mathematics as model, could be applied on and understand human action (praxis).
5   On the mediation between the universal and the particular, see Bernstein (1983).

the universal onto the particular – it wants to mediate between the universal and the particular, the general and the specific. In short, practical wisdom is not universal, necessary, deductive and objectively true (Schuchman 1979: 43-44).

Phronēsis is also not practical knowledge in the sense of *techne* [(b) above]. Although it is, like *techne*, a dynamic example of practical knowledge (Aristotle 2009: 1140a24-28), action and application, it still differs from *techne*. *Techne* is a form of knowledge that guides action, for example, where a craftsman applies his technical knowledge, as a blueprint (and even prescriptively), in a specific field. It is all about the skill to make or to produce things and one can learn or forget these skills (Gadamer 1975a: 300/2004: 315). As opposed to this *phronēsis* is not acquired prescriptively like the technical skills or the blueprint of the craftsman. It is here not about a means-end relationship: *Phronēsis* has no fixed goal or knowledge acquired in advance (Gadamer 1975a: 304; 2004: 318). It is rather about ethical knowledge (*aretē*) that is formed through our daily exercise of the virtues on the way to the good life.[6] In other words: practical wisdom comes down to making the right decisions with the help of wisdom and intuition as filters of technical and scientific knowledge. *Phronēsis* is thus practical wisdom of human action, which is not just universal but also contingent, and specifically part of human existential praxis.[7]

To summarise: *Phronēsis* plays a mediating role between theoretical-universal and practical-contingent knowledge. In this sense it is a kind of pragmatic and context dependent knowledge. It is not an abstract form of intellectual knowledge, because it works with human emotions and imagination. *Phronēsis is* the mediation between the particular (situation) and the universal, on the way to the human good. Such mediation entails that the practically wise person is able to judge what universal ideas are relevant and applicable in a given situation in order to make the right decisions and judgements to act. *Phronēsis*, though, is not exclusively focused on the practical wise person, but also about the reciprocal relationship between self and society, self and history – the force fields in which concrete historical and contingent-particular decisions and judgements must be made. It is about *sensus communis* (Gadamer 1975a: 16-27; 2004: 17-27), the good life with and for others (Ricoeur), and political and social decision-making or judgement (Arendt).[8] McNeill and Feldman (1998: 2) put it aptly that practically wise people "...put their own traditions, cultures, histories and languages into question and into dialogue with one another, beyond the perspective or objective of attaining eternal truths".

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6   On *aretē*, see Gadamer (1976a: 18) and Schuchman (1980: 55-63).
7   See Schuchman (1979: 45; 1980: 22-23), Self (1979: 133), and Hollinger (1985).
8   Aristotle (2009: 1097a 8-14) uses *phronēsis* with reference to the actions of the weaver, carpenter, general, and doctor. For Kant's use of *sensus communis*, that is also important for Hannah Arendt, see Kant (2000: 173-176).

1.2. *Phronēsis* and politics in Aristotle

The extension of *phronēsis* from individual-ethical to the social-political decision-making could be further nuanced through Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1948 [1908]) and *Politics* (1962). In this regard Aristotle's famous metaphysical distinction between matter and form, as part of his doctrine of causes, can be read with his politics in the following way. The material cause of politics is the individuals and groups that live in a specific geographical place. That is the matter of politics. The formal cause is the constitution of a state. It gives constitutional form to the political matter. The effective or acting cause is the ruler, statesman and lawgiver in a limited sense or, more broadly, all those who, in the spirit of practical wisdom, attempt to deliberate between the universal constitution and the particular interests of the citizenry. We can describe this in our own time as the public sphere of society. From this follows the end cause of politics – that is, a happy or flourishing state that embodies justice. In this sense individual happiness (as described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and collective politics (as described in *Politics*) (Aristotle 1962) are mutual. Here the state does not exist in a liberal manner externally from the individual. The focus is rather on the interaction between individual and group. Such an idea of the human good is critical about a type of government which removes the citizens too far from everyday decision-making (Taylor 1995: 242).

Although Aristotle, in his own time, was not critical enough about the position of women and slaves in the household it is also true that he did not see the city or *polis* as something that merely sustains life, but that the *polis* is there for the good life self (Taylor 1995: 235, 237). Nevertheless the tension remains between Aristotle's more participatory idea of the *polis*, on the one hand, and his more elitist conception of the aristocratically managed *polis*, a legacy which we must deal with in our own time (Taylor 1995: 242). It is on this point that it becomes necessary to rethink *phronēsis* in our own time. Is there still place for practical wisdom in a society characterised by different perspectives of the true, good and beautiful? In answering this question Aristotle, within his time, remains a worthwhile discussion partner – also for contemporary interlocutors.

2. GADAMER AND A PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) offers an interesting contemporary interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of *phronēsis*.[9] Gadamer's contribution, which is influenced by Heidegger's *phenomenological-dialogical* reading of the philosophical tradition (Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel) in the 1920s, can be positioned

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9   For a biography on Gadamer, see Grondin (2003). For a shorter overview of Gadamer, see Wright (1998), Warnke (2002), and Malpas (2009).

in three related domains.[10] First, the development and defence of a philosophical hermeneutics in which *phronēsis* as practical philosophy plays a key role. Secondly, Gadamer's intense dialogue with the history of philosophy, in which the most prominent interlocutors are Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Heidegger. Thirdly, there is Gadamer's interest in aesthetics – and more specifically poetical literature. The ensuing reconstruction will focus on the main concepts of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (including *phronēsis*) and their implications for contemporary politics.

As stated above, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is closely allied with his interpretation of classical Greek thinking. Here his early work on Plato was crucial for the philosophical direction of his later thinking. Under the influence of some of his first teachers (Hartmann, Friedländer), Gadamer did not seek a concealed doctrine in Plato, but he rather focused on the structure of the Platonic dialogue. This focus on the dialogical movement in Plato is then linked with the process of human understanding – a process in which there is a reciprocal relationship between subject and object. This dialogical reading of Plato also opens the space for a reception of Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). This latter concept is important, not just as a way of our practical being-in-the-world (Heidegger), but also to mediate the universal with the particular in a dialogical way.[11] As put, the concept of *phronēsis* is a further extension and nuance of dialogical understanding as articulated by Plato. For Malpas (2009) the meeting of the concepts dialogue and the practically wise launches Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Both of these concepts, though, are further illuminated by other concepts in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics: play, working-historical consciousness, the hermeneutical circle and the fusion of horizons.

2.1. Phronēsis as play, historical consciousness, hermeneutical circle, and fusion of horizons

What is the relationship between dialogue, *phronēsis* and play? In the first part of Gadamer's major book, *Truth and method,* play is related to the aesthetic experience as well as sport (Gadamer 1975a: 97; 2004: 103). With play Gadamer proposes (against Kant) that the subject and the object are reciprocally engaged in the experience of the artwork. The experience of the artwork is not exclusively determined by the

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10   The tree terrains of Gadamer's work differ from Malpas's (2009) four terrains, but are nevertheless influenced by him. These three terrains are also reflected in Palmer's recent selection of essays in Gadamer (2007).

11   Heidegger's phenomenological-hermeneutical lectures on Plato and Aristotle (Marburg 1920s) were a big influence on Gadamer (Heidegger 1992; Taminiaux 2007: 15-16). These lectures also influenced Hannah Arendt (Volpi 2007: 32). Gadamer's habilitation (under Heidegger) was a phenomenological reading of Plato's concept of dialogue and Aristotle's concept of the practical. On the political thinking of the young Gadamer, see Sullivan (1990) and for the complex relationship between Gadamer and Heidegger, see Dostal (2002).

subject because the subject can undergo change in the experience of the artwork. Unlike in the case of scientific knowledge, in the experience of the artwork there is also no object or objectification. *Vis-à-vis* the aesthetic Gadamer also points to the never-ending hither-and-thither movement of sport as play event. The actual subject of play is not the individual but the game itself. The player does not create the game, but participates in it.[12] Gadamer shows how art spectators can lose themselves in the experience of the truth claim of an artwork or theatre production – just like players and spectators can lose themselves in a game like rugby or soccer. This ontological conception of play also works through to Gadamer's conception of history and tradition (part II of *Truth and method*) as well as his conception of language as the medium of hermeneutical experience (part III of *Truth and method*). As in the case of the perception of art, language is not grounded exclusively in the consciousness of the individual subject, but mainly in the language that we call dialogue or conversation (Wright 1998). In a similar fashion the consciousness of every person is influenced by history and that consciousness stands open to the effects or the working of history as play, the so-called working-historical consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). In short, one's understanding (consciousness) of oneself in the world (in the Heideggerian sense) is always historical, linguistic and contingent (Wright 1998). Hence knowledge that does not relate to concrete historical situations, such as Descartes' mathematical knowledge, is empty – unless such knowledge is relevant to help us in a given situation to make the right decision. For Gadamer we don't only interpret the textual and cultural traditions that influence us but we also try to *apply* them within the normative frameworks of our own contemporary theoretical and practical lives. The emphasis on application does not imply a rigid conservatism but a *living tradition* that is also orientated to the future. Application does not mean uncommitted or unprejudiced understanding (Gadamer 1976b: 58-59). Understanding is a continuous mediating process between universal knowledge claims and our historical informed practices.

This brings us to two other concepts of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics that relate to dialogue and *phronēsis* – the *hermeneutical circle* and the *fusion of horizons*. The hermeneutical circle is a process in which the whole is understood through the parts and the parts through the whole. Understanding in this sense is mediated and not verified methodically and objectively. This is the case in our experience of the artwork as set out above and in our attempts to understand historical texts and other cultures. This circular game of parts and whole in art, historical interpretation and intercultural understanding is obviously related to the model of conversation or dialogue. Here the Platonic concept returns in the form of question and answer. Language in the form of conversation then leads us to the fusion of

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12   See Gadamer (1975a: 102; 2004: 106): "The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players…Whoever 'tries' is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game…is not the player but the game itself."

horizons. Such a fusion takes place where the horizon of an artwork, historical text or other culture is brought into critical dialogue with the horizon of the interpreter.[13] In other words, the interpreter opens the horizon of the other (the text or artwork) by allowing it to question the interpreter's prejudices towards the case at hand. The point is that my own cultural horizon must be in principle open to the horizon of the other's culture so that we can question one another in the dialogue about one another's prejudices. What follows is a dialogue of question and answer where the interpreter does not only question the truth claim of the case at hand but he or she also allows his or her prejudices to be questioned by that with which he or she is confronted. This is a gamble, because one puts one's prejudices on the line in an open dialogue of question and answer. An authentic fusion of horizons leads to a situation where the respective interlocutors in a discourse can understand differently (Wright 1998). So, the fusion of horizons in a multicultural society is the precondition for taking the right ethical decisions when a decision concerns me and the other. But what are the ethical and the political implications of the central concepts in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as discussed above?

2.2. The political implications of philosophical hermeneutics

Gadamer provides us with a sombre vision of our contemporary scientifically steered culture and politics that function according to one-dimensional means-end methodology which shifts practical wisdom (in the form of dialogue and conversation between citizens) to the margins.[14] Gadamer (1977: 534) writes: "…science makes possible knowledge directed to the power of making, a knowing mastery of nature. This is technology. And this is precisely what practice is not…What in fact emerged, however, was 'science' with its new notion of theory as well as practice. This is a true event in the history of man, which conferred a new social and political accent on science."

   Examples of such a scientifically steered politics are: the technological manipulation of public media; the limitation of the citizen's political action to mere participation in elections; and the interests of economical power formations and multinational companies. Even the configurations of our social life and the most intimate forms of interaction today are steered by techno-economical organisation. Spontaneous and creative social interactions such as between citizens are rather the exception.[15] In the process our time is defined by catchphrases such as economic

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13 For his later work on art, see Gadamer (1986) and for his version of the fusion of horizons in the case of religion, see Gadamer (1999).

14 Gadamer (1979: 75; 1983: 71-72) echoes here a long list of criticism on a reductive concept of science (Dilthey), *Gestell*, (Heidegger), rationalisation (Weber), reification (Lukács), instrumental reason (Horkheimer and Adorno), colonisation of the lifeworld (Habermas), and power technologies (Foucault).

15 On hermeneutical citizenship, see Alejandro (1993).

viability and driven by never-ending change. The expert, the consultant, the methodologist, the strategical manager, the social engineer are the cultural heroes of our technocratic time. In their strategic proposals the adjustability of the individual is more important than his or her potential to be practically wise. It is a society in which the official is only involved with administrative functions and duties and does not display a greater sense of ethical responsibility and decision-making. Everyone plays his or her respective role in the techno-scientific and monetary system – a role which is subject to the smooth functioning of the system and where praxis is reduced to technique (Gadamer 1976b: 59-60; 1981: 73-74).

2.3. Gadamer's alternative revisited

Gadamer, however, does not leave us with this bleak picture of contemporary politics. In his alternative he first provides a certain historical interpretation of modern thinking and then returns to the Aristotelian concept of *phronēsis*. Gadamer finds the roots of our techno-scientifically steered politics in the Cartesian-Lockean epistemological legacy and its neo-Kantian appropriation.[16] Here he is, similar to Arendt as we will see, very critical about how appearances as brute facts are decontextualised in the Western scientific consciousness.[17] It is not about the fact on its own, but the context in which the fact becomes meaningful. Scientific knowledge is not context-independent. The task of philosophy is to protect practical reason against a technological-based science. On this point philosophical hermeneutics must free itself from "...the idolatry of scientific method and of the anonymous authority of the sciences in order to allow the noblest task of the citizen – decision-making according to one's own responsibility instead of conceding the task to the expert" (Gadamer 1975b: 315-316).

Gadamer continues that human and political conflicts must be addressed in a non-technical and practically wise fashion. Such an approach differs from pure deductive logic, because it relates to the self-understanding of historical and linguistically based individuals and communities. It is here where *phronēsis* reappears since we have to make historically informed judgements in a given situation (Gadamer 1979: 85). It is all about a dialogue or conversation about those perspectives that offer the best theoretical answers to practical questions in a given tradition. For Wachterhauser (1986: 39-40) this is power of self-understanding and cultural change. Such a pragmatic alternative, though, is always tentative, provisional, and full of dangers because *phronēsis* concerns the plurality of opinions. Here past events are applied within present normative considerations, which on their part influence the future.

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16   See on this point Gadamer (1982: 21-22; 1985: 21-22; 1987: 452-455).

17   "...with respect to hermeneutics and humanities as a whole we have the task of subordinating both our scientific contribution to the cultural, and academic education to a more fundamental project of letting the tradition speak us" (Gadamer 1979: 83).

Hence, humanity remains historical in spite of the modern Western illusion that all human questions can be addressed in a purely techno-scientific fashion. The human condition requires humility and modesty.[18] Gadamer (1975b: 316; 1981: 52) thus sees his philosophical hermeneutics as heir of the older tradition of practical philosophy and a catalyst against the domination of a scientifically based technology.

3. ARENDT AND HERMENEUTICAL POLITICS

The political thinking of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) is unique and difficult to categorise as "political science", "conceptual analysis", "history of ideas", or "ideological".[19] One of the reasons for the uniqueness of Arendt's political thinking is her specific German and central-European education – an education that remained influential even after her emigration to the USA and her work in the English-speaking world (Young-Bruehl 1982: 104). In this regard the emphasis is on a historical and systematic interpretation of the whole tradition of political thinking.[20] After finishing her studies under Heidegger (Marburg) and Jaspers (Heidelberg) in the 1920s, she had to flee the Nazi regime, in 1933, via Paris to the USA.[21] This experience confronted Arendt head-on with phenomena such as totalitarianism, war, the Holocaust, and the problems of modern post-war America (Conovan 1974: 1, 4-5). Within this context her unique concept of politics crystallised.[22] For purposes of this contribution it will be explored in terms of Arendt's very important distinction between empirical and hermeneutical politics (Parekh 1981: 59-60; 1982: 1-2). This latter concept of Arendt, being strongly influenced by a type of phenomenological reading of Aristotle's concept of *phronēsis*, also has implications for her work on truth and politics and its implications for concepts such as freedom, action, history, and language.

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18 Gadamer (1976b: 59-60; 1981: 73-74) writes: "...'know thyself' still holds good for us as well. For it means 'know that you are not god, but a human being'."

19 Earlier on Jay (1978: 348) sketches Arendt as altogether *hors categori*. Her "noncategorisability" is also "… evidence of creativity and a refusal to wear ideological blinders".

20 For Heidegger and Jaspers's influence on Arendt, see Allen (1982: 174-176).

21 There are also differences between Arendt and Heidegger: Heidegger's scepticism about public life, and his Nazi sympathies (1933-1945). Hinchman and Hinchman (1984: 109) write: "In sum, many of the elements for a 'new humanism' are present in *Being and time*, though certainly not all of them. Arendt also owed a great deal to Jaspers, to Kant…But we can also discern the seeds of her later work in Heidegger's fundamental ontology, only developed in a different direction and in a different spirit than Heidegger…expected or wanted."

22 For studies on Arendt's political thinking, see Benhabib (2003), Bernstein (1996), Conovan (1974), Parekh (1981), Villa (1999), Young-Bruehl (2006). See also the articles of D'Entreves (2014), Luban (1983), Parekh (1982) and Villa (2000). For a fine biography, see Young-Bruehl (1982).

3.1. Arendt's critique of empirical politics

Arendt, like Gadamer, is well aware that "traditional political science" is closely allied with an empirical political approach (Parekh 1982: 2). The empirical approach can be described as a "search for truth" (like the "what is?" questions of the natural sciences) against the hermeneutical approach with its "search for meaning and understanding". For Arendt empirical questions seek information or explanations about aspects of the sense-observable world. It asks about the origin, existence and description of a particular object, for example: What is the capital of France? Is your father still alive? When did Caesar cross the Rubicon? How does a watch, machine or an atom bomb work? What causes earthquakes? For Arendt these questions share, at least, a basic characteristic – the search for empirical truth. And such a truth-concept is either purely formal (logically/mathematically) or it corresponds with an aspect of the sense-observable world. Such questions focus on a specific aspect of the world, which is then investigated by generally acceptable procedures, methods, or criteria in order to arrive at relevant and verified knowledge.[23]

The truth concept of an empirical political approach has the following characteristics: 1) Empirical truth is inherently public and in principle open to all. 2) Such truth concept follows universally accepted procedures and methods. It is objective such as chairs, tables and other human creations that exist independently from its creator and the existence of a world of shared knowledge. 3) Truth is impersonal in the sense that its validity exists independently of human needs such as longing, hope, and fear. 4) Such a truth is by nature coercive because any challenge of it is deemed irrational and unnatural. Arendt (1978 I: 61) writes: "Truth is what we are compelled to admit by the nature either of our senses or of our brain." Truth thus compels us to follow the laws of the logic of empirical evidence. It leaves the intellect with no alternative, but conformity. In this process human freedom or plurality is destroyed in agreeing that $2 + 2 = 4$ or by verifying a fact in the natural sciences – like the explanation of an earthquake.

Arendt offers against such a position the following critique in which Aristotle's concept of *phronēsis* plays an evident role: *Firstly*, political life is seen as a means towards an end. It is thus subjugated to something extrinsic to it – truth as neutral observable and verifiable knowledge that doesn't need the idea of an intersubjective human world of the public sphere and human appearance. The autonomy of politics

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23 See Wolin (1977: 92): "The version of theory which political scientists borrowed from their colleagues in the more advanced social sciences was remarkable not only for its tendency to associate theory with 'methodology' but for its distinct hostility toward history and philosophy. As a consequence, this new form of theory had nothing very significant to say about the issues which dominated the politics of the twentieth century: war, totalitarianism, democracy, imperialism, racial oppression, ecological policy, and corporate power."

is, *secondly*, not acknowledged by an empirically informed concept of politics.[24] In this process certain political emotions such as love for the world, neighbourly care and friendship fall away and an empirical concept of politics (and truth) cannot deal epistemologically with concepts such as opinion, judgement and human difference. *Thirdly*, empirical political approach boils down to a kind of "direct conceptualisation of politics" which prevents any phenomenological interpretation of "direct concepts" such as freedom, the state, law, sovereignty, etc. Here Arendt (1963: 122) asks: How can one provide an analysis of the concept of revolution without revolutionary experience? Such a concept cannot be analysed and defined in an abstract manner, but only within the relevant context of human relations and experiences (Parekh 1982: 5-6). *Fourthly* empirical politics focuses on the formal structure of the state and governing process. The problem here is that political questions are asked from the perspective of those who govern, rather from the perspectives of acting citizens.[25]

3.2. Hermeneutical politics as alternative

For Arendt (1958: 187-188; 1961: 201) hermeneutical questions, which are closely related to Aristotle's concept of *phronēsis*, can be asked on different levels and in different contexts. For example, someone can seek the meaning of a certain experience or she can ask about the meaning of an activity or institution such as: research; education; art; the state; and nature conservation. At the most basic level one can ask about the meaning of life. On another level one may be perplexed about the meaning of a life based on materialism. For Arendt the search for meaning eventually comes down to the desire to know what to do (to act); to know what form of life and what kind of action are worthy for a human life. Such a search, according to Arendt, is related to the fact that human beings are responsible for their decisions or judgements (Parekh 1982: 2-3).

For Arendt hermeneutical questions, despite differences, share the following characteristics: *Firstly*, it does not ask whether an object exists, how it came to exist or how does it work. It rather asks about the meaning and value of an object or phenomenon and cannot be answered purely on the basis of empirical knowledge of the world. Empirical information, on its part, cannot explain the value of an event in a person's life nor what kind of action is worthy of a person. For Arendt hermeneutical questions are not based on a pure verifiable knowledge process – but on judgement. In the place of empirical research, she rather speaks of reflexion, meditation and thinking.

Secondly, hermeneutical questions do not originate from indifference or shallow curiosity about the world – but from existential wonderment (as Aristotle puts it).

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24   For Arendt's view on the autonomy of politics, see Jay (1978: 248-268).
25   Conovan (1978: 5-6) states that although Arendt defends a democratic politics of citizens here, she is also elsewhere negative about the "masses". See also Jay (1978: 362) in this regard.

Human beings are born in a world which is *prima facie* strange. They act, suffer, experience, and choose between forms of life, the meaning of which is not always self-evident. Human beings as rational beings desire meaning and want a convincing and intelligent answer.

Thirdly, since hermeneutical questions are non-empirical by nature, their answers cannot be verified or falsified, but only defended by arguments. Hence answers are not true or false, but convincing or unconvincing, probable or improbable, insightful or banal. In comparison to empirical questions, which have only one true answer, hermeneutical questions can be answered in different ways. Human action or experience take different forms and can be differently interpreted. For Arendt these kinds of questions cannot, like empirical questions, be final or complete – but at best convincing. The person to whom the questions are addressed must be free to give his or her consent or not (Parekh 1981: 61-62).

In short: the search for meaning or understanding is crucial for Arendt's political thinking. In this regard the meaning of an object/phenomenon – such as culture, art, knowledge, lifeform or a life – is related to its position within a greater context. For Arendt human existence ("the human condition") offers such a context (Parekh 1982: 3-4). In such an existential-phenomenological framework there is a reciprocal relationship between perceiver and phenomena. The perceiver does not investigate the phenomena with a pre-ordained procedure, but by considering the background or horizon (Gadamer) from where the phenomena reach her. This sketch of Arendt's concept of political hermeneutics can be further explored through the concepts of truth, freedom, action, history, and language.[26]

3.3. Truth and (hermeneutical) politics

Given her concept of hermeneutical politics, Arendt uses a highly qualified concept of truth in politics. For her the highest value of politics is not truth – but *freedom* (Conovan 1974: 113). As mentioned above, the empirical political approach is coercive by nature. In this process opinions are eliminated and uniformity achieved. Arendt finds in Western thinking a strong tendency for such a rigid and coercive paradigm of truth – the logical argument. Deductive argumentation where everything flows from the first statement, allows no escape from the outlines of logical thinking, even where common sense shows another option. More fundamental, the concept of absolute truth, in a dogmatic system, endangers for Arendt (1958: 7-8) political freedom, because it leaves no space for human diversity, plurality, and to initiate.[27]

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26 On freedom in Arendt's "existentialism", see Allen (1982: 179-187). For a critique of Arendt's concept of freedom, see Fuss (1973: 256-258).

27 See Jay (1978: 354): "Freedom she maintained is the opposite of necessity, not its handmaiden. Pluralism, not unity, is the precondition for its maintenance. Montesquieu and Tocqueville were among the few modern theorists whose recognition of this reality ties them to the pre-Socratic Greeks."

The biggest danger for human action is political solutions which strip the richness (plurality) of human life. The tyrant or dictator, for example, enforces his or her authority and destroys in that sense all forms of resistance. He or she is in a position where only his or her thinking and truth count, while his people are coerced to accept this truth. Totalitarism goes, according to Arendt (1951) further than tyrannies by destroying human plurality in a calculated manner (King 1984: 244). Apart from the systematic terror in which all human capabilities of the victims are eliminated, the whole population is taken up in a movement where everyone is becoming a mere cog in the wheel and expression of an ideology. Personal action is thus substituted by an ideological paradigm and personal thinking by a standpoint (Conovan 1974: 112). Arendt does not want to accuse all empirical politics of totalitarian thinking, but she emphasises that such an unreflective use of the concept of truth in politics may lead to human tragedy.

Arendt's position on truth and politics can be qualified in two senses. *Firstly*, it should be clear that she is not against truth *per se*, but against a certain usage of truth – the usage of an empirical and natural scientific idea of truth when it comes to politics.[28] The truth that Arendt wants to defend is truth that is sensitive for the particular. It is not about scientific (or religious) truth here, but rather about contingent-factual truth. Arendt describes such a truth as very fragile – and of limited use. In her essay "Truth and politics" she distinguishes between rational and factual-contingent truth. The former, she argues, came already in conflict with politics when Plato and his followers set up an opposition between philosophy and opinion (rhetoric) – the life of the philosopher put against that of the citizen (Allen 1982: 187). Although this conflict does not exist anymore, Arendt still wants to defend the fragile nature of factual-contingent truths in politics. The problem with such a truth, though, is that it can only be constituted by evidence – and evidence can easily be destroyed. Organised lies can easily exterminate all kinds of memory – and once lost it cannot be recovered. This is the case in our contemporary world where the re-writing of history and political and commercial lies operate on such a scale that it is difficult to distinguish these lies from reality.[29] In short: where politics destroys

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28 Arendt's view of truth is also influenced by Lessing, but while his drama *Nathan der Weise* sketches the difference between opinion and truth in terms of religion, Arendt (1968) considers modern science. Here friendship, humaneness, and difference of opinion suffer under science as truth – the dream of science as a fully-whole of any subject. Like Lessing, Arendt stands critical against the inevitable one-dimensionality of truth and she is rather attracted by the polemical nature of the mutual strife of opinions (Conovan 1974: 114-115).

29 Compare Wolin (1977: 93): "Politicians, parties, sects, and nations have an unquenchable urge to rewrite reality to accord with their interest. Factual trust is the testimony which enables political judgment to contradict the appearances created by politicians and to say to the atrocities and misdeeds of politics, *J'accuse.*"

factual-contingent truth, it also destroys the common world – the space in which political action must take place.

In can be asked whether Arendt's concept of truth, *secondly*, leads to relativism? Arendt, though, argues, with reference to the *Federalist Papers*, that difference of opinion is not irrational, but the result of reason. Arendt (1963: 229) also develops the concept of opinion by distinguishing it from *interests*. Interests are the product of groups in politics, while opinions stem from individuals. Arendt is against a position of unanimity (where there is no difference of opinion), because it operates by coercion. When a human being is free, their opinions differ because they look at the world from different points of view (Luban 1983: 228). In her essay "Truth and politics" political thinking is for Arendt "representative", because as opinion-formation it is based on judgement. Here one is exposed to many standpoints before he or she comes to a conclusion. Such a kind of thinking is not justified through irrefutable evidence, but by seeing the object from as many as possible perspectives. Such a thinking is thus neither empirically evident nor relativist.

3.4. The importance of history and language for hermeneutical politics

A further characteristic of Arendt's political thinking is her use of history – more specifically Greek and Roman history. Similar to Gadamer's concept of *working-historical consciousness*, Arendt interprets history not as mere illustration material, but as a past reference-point that can serve critically against the presuppositions of the (present) modern world. In this way the historical knowledge of life-forms, locked up in classical languages, makes it possible to access a wider variety of human experience than normally given. History is a treasure trove of human experiences, and especially classical history serves for Arendt as a symbolical court of appeal against (present) contemporary culture.

Arendt's appeal to history, though, goes further. She criticises not just the narrowness of contemporary culture, but also a type of political science that fixates human experiences in the present (Conovan 1974: 11). Here she polemicises against a social scientific construction of politics where human beings are the aggregate of statistics, mass-conduct, and mass-opinion, because it aims at predictable conduct and reaction. In this process free and unique actions and thinking, constituted by history, are neglected. By linking human beings to predictability, social and political scientists provide us with a determined concept of politics and history (Arendt 1970: 6-8). The problem here is that the analogy with general laws in physics and other sciences leads to the ignorance of the particular and unique movement of human events (Luban 1983: 218).

Her critique of generalisation also comes forward where social scientists use language without the necessary sensitivity and distinctions.[30] One of her most important differences with modern academics is their insensitivity for words and the substitution of a language full of nuances with a technical language stripped of all existential meaning. This is another example where the rich variety of human life, and politics, is reduced to a kind of functionalist and instrumental thinking.

4. Some concluding remarks

The reconstruction of Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and the way that this concept was appropriated in the work of two contemporary thinkers, the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and the hermeneutical politics of Hannah Arendt, also make it possible to offer some concluding remarks about politics in divided and pluralist societies. These remarks are offered as pointers for a (hopefully) critical dialogue amongst South Africans about their past, present, and future.

Firstly, we must guard against dealing with the world in an exclusively rigid, law-like technocratic fashion opposed to practical wise action. There are obvious dangers attached to planning or managing a multicultural or divided society according to a technical or technocratic blueprint – for example where we read the constitution of a country in a purely technical sense without any contextualisation or where we enforce quotas, racial or otherwise, in a complex society.

Secondly, the alternatives of Gadamer and Arendt should make us aware of the importance of history in understanding any society, and more specifically, a pluralist one. Gadamer refers to a working-historical consciousness and Arendt links her concept of hermeneutical politics intimately with history. The lesson for a divided and pluralist society is that any form of normative action and decision-making (or judgement) in the present, must be aware of the past in order to move forward. At this point the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer) implies that the dialogue or conversation between different elements of a multicultural society must never stop. In other words, one-sided views of history that often characterise divided societies can precisely not be afforded in such societies, and must always again be subjected to further dialogue and mutual deliberation. It should be a never-ending conversation, even though the fusion of horizons could end in some kind of fragile normative consensus. Such a consensus, though, must always be open to further improvements. Eventually we must, according to Gadamer, stay optimistic about a critical dialogue as a normative possibility for mediation in a divided society.

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30   Cooper (1976: 173) sees a similarity between Arendt, Wittgenstein and other language philosophers here. "The point here is that there are various subregions in our language; for example, there is discourse dealing with mathematics, science, aesthetic evaluations, morality, political judgment, etc., and each of these different modes of discourse employs different notions of truth, different ways of resolving disagreement, and different standards of rationality."

Finally I would like to argue that both Gadamer and Arendt offer a challenge to an atomistic conception of the individual – one where he or she supposedly floats around in the infinite ocean of the present without any historical and cultural moorings. The target here is that form of liberalism which Michael Sandel calls the unencumbered self, that is, the idea of the self as completely non-aligned, detached and only responsible for her own interests.[31] This question is important because it is ironically enough precisely in divided societies where a shared fate is not so apparent, that such an atomistic idea of the self can easily take root. The extent to which such a conception after 1994 took root in South Africa can be seen in the scale on which a civil ethos, characterised by the common care for one another and for infrastructure, is undermined by the ruthless pursuit of instant wealth acquired through dubious means.

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31   See about this Sandel (1982).

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