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Political Hermeneutics in the Writings of John Dewey and Hannah Arendt

Provisional Version
(Please do not quote without consultation)

This paper[1] focuses on John Dewey's and Hannah Arendt's political thinking, but it treats both thinkers as exemplary cases in order to bring out a general theoretical question which plays an important role also in the works of a number of other political thinkers particularly from the 20th century, among them Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin.[2] My aim is to raise the question of the relation between politics and hermeneutics, between the problem of the Political on the one hand and the problem of understanding and interpretation on the other. I want to suggest that these two problems are intimately and substantially connected with each other and that this can be demonstrated by an exemplary interpretation of the two thinkers at hand.

I want to argue that a core aspect of both Dewey's and Arendt's political theories is the idea that in order to theoretically understand politics or "the

[1] The paper summarizes some of the results of a more comprehensive study which will be published in German early next year under the title "Politische Hermeneutik. Verstehen, Politik und Kritik bei John Dewey und Hannah Arendt".

[2] The crucial significance of the question of "hermeneutics and politics" in Strauss's work is obvious. See Leo Strauss: Persecution and the Art of Writing, Chicago/London (University of Chicago Press) 1988. The questions raised in this paper, however, are more directly inspired by some earlier studies on Eric Voegelin's political theory, although an elaborate consideration of the topic comparable to Strauss's study, is missing in Voegelin's writings. For the theoretical conception of political hermeneutics as it in my opinion is implied in Voegelin see Hans-Jörg Sigwart: Eine Hermeneutik des Politischen. Eric Voegelins Entwurf einer geisteswissenschaftlichen Staats- und Herrschaftslehre, in: Peter J. Opitz (Ed.): Erich Voegelins Herrschaftslehre: Annäherungen an einen schwierigen Text, Occasional Papers LVII, München (Eric Voegelin Archiv) 2007, S. 19-39.

Political", it indeed has to be understood and described in hermeneutical terms. Although neither Dewey nor Arendt themselves explicitly use the term "political hermeneutics" and although there is no elaborate and explicit theory of hermeneutics (as a theory of "understanding" and of its various objectifications as "culture" or common "experience") to be found in their writings, such a theory of hermeneutics nonetheless is implied in their respective ideas of what politics is about. This distinctly hermeneutical understanding of the political problem in both thinkers has various interesting consequences for their understanding of major questions of political theory, among them the classical question of the relation between politics and theory or politics and philosophy. These are the two questions this paper focuses on. In the second chapter I will outline the distinctly hermeneutic understanding of politics that is implied in Dewey and Arendt. After that, in the third part, I will briefly indicate some of its implications for the relation between philosophy or theory and politics.

In order to bring out these political-hermeneutic implications in Dewey's and Arendt's writings, it is necessary to somewhat step back from the more concrete topics of their writings and rather concentrate on the theoretical and methodical principles implied in them. And it is helpful to interpret them within a German-American comparative perspective, particularly to read them before the background of the classical hermeneutical tradition (which, of course, from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Hans-Georg Gadamer is a predominantly German philosophical tradition). This not only makes it easier to highlight the hermeneutical implications in Dewey's and Arendt's works which are not always very clearly articulated. It in turn also helps to highlight some major theoretical shortcomings of that classical German hermeneutic tradition itself. The comparative perspective particularly brings to the fore the fact that while in Dewey and Arendt the general hermeneutic problem of "understanding" is treated within a distinctly political theory and is therefore intimately connected with political problems, it is this very connection which is missing in the German tradition of hermeneutic philosophy. In the first part of my paper I will give a brief outline of this comparative perspective and take an exemplary look on Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of the hermeneutic problem in order to clarify the critical point just mentioned, by indicating how and to what extend *politics*,

although Gadamer himself occasionally seems to emphasize its importance for hermeneutics, nonetheless represents the pivotal blank space within his hermeneutic philosophy.

I. German and American Hermeneutics

To put Dewey's and Arendt's works in such a comparative perspective and also to treat them as hermeneutical thinkers can be justified with biographical reasons, to begin with. In both thinkers' intellectual biographies, the German philosophical discourse of the 19th and early 20th century plays an important and a very ambivalent role. It serves as a source of inspiration and at the same time it is the object of a fundamental critique. In both respects, Dewey's and Arendt's critical reading of major parts of that German philosophical tradition had a significant influence on their own theories. In the case of Arendt, the influence of Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy on her own perspective, for instance, but also the important role of her determined critique of Heidegger's existentialism is quite obvious.[3] The influence of both is discernable not only in Arendt's essay on "Understanding and Politics" which directly addresses the hermeneutic problem,[4] but also in a number of key concepts of her general theory of politics and action, such as the concepts of "Welt" and "Mitwelt" or her idea of peculiar narratives that constitute public spaces and political communities.[5] The whole general outset of her political theory, furthermore, is influenced and shaped by her conscious attempt to emancipate herself from the apolitical traditions of continental, and particularly of German philosophy by turning to the distinctly political experiences of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and to the modern American political tradition.

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[3] On Arendt's conceptual relation to Heidegger's philosophy see Dana Villa: Arendt and Heidegger. The Fate of the Political, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1996.

[4] Hannah Arendt: Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding), in: Hannah Arendt: Essays in Understanding 1930-1954. Edited with an introduction by Jerome Kohn, New York (Schocken) 2005, pp. 307-327.

[5] See Hannah Arendt: The Human Condition, 2nd Edition, Introduction by Margaret Canovan, Chicago/London (University of Chicago Press) 1998, pp. 50 ff., 175 ff.

What Dewey, on the other hand, shares not only with other prominent representatives of the philosophy of American pragmatism, but also with most of the classical representatives of German hermeneutic theory, is the substantial influence of his elaborate and critical examination of the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel,[6] partly also his reference to various Neo-Kantian conceptions (particularly the concept of "value"). A critical reading of Kant and Hegel indeed constitutes a major part to the philosophical basis not only of German hermeneutics, but also of American Pragmatism. In certain respects, Dewey's pragmatism can be seen as the genuinely American variant of that broad discourse of critical philosophical Neo- or Post-Hegelianism (combined with certain Neo-Kantian implications) which had a pervading influence on the intellectual scene in the late 19th and early 20th century and which also builds up the philosophical background of German hermeneutic philosophy. Seen before this background, it even seems appropriate to characterize American pragmatism and German hermeneutics as parallel philosophical traditions that share a number of fundamental questions and conceptions.[7]

These common questions and conceptions primarily concern the attempt to theoretically grasp the peculiarities of "societies" or "Lebenswelten" as "universes of meaning"[8] that form the "natural" environment of man as a "cultural" and "historical" being, as a being, thus, that creates and shapes the conditions of his own existence in a variety of practices.[9] To describe and to understand these cultural environments, built up of the various "objectifications" of practical processes and consisting of complex patterns of practical relations, meanings, symbols, ideas, and institutions, and to understand the various forms

[6] See the short summary on Dewey's reading of Hegel in Robert B. Westbrook: John Dewey and American Democracy, Ithaca/London (Cornell University Press) 1991, pp. 13 ff.

[7] Such a common theoretical basis of pragmatism and hermeneutics is explicitly emphasized, for instance, in Richard Rorty's reading of Gadamer, Heidegger and Dewey (see Richard Rorty: Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition, Princeton/Oxford (Princeton University Press) 2009, pp. 357 ff.) or, in a more general and neutral way, by the German philosopher Karl-Otto Apel: Szientismus oder transzendentale Hermeneutik? Zur Frage nach dem Subjekt der Zeicheninterpretation in der Semiotik des Pragmatismus, in: Rüdiger Bubner et al (Eds.): Hermeneutik und Dialektik, Bd. I, Tübingen (Mohr) 1970, pp. 105-144, here: p. 133, footnote 62.

[8] John Dewey: Experience and Nature (1925), in: The Later Works Vol. 1, p. 249. See also Gadamer's use of the concept of the "hermeneutic universe" in his preface to the 2nd edition of *Truth and Method*: Vorwort zur 2. Auflage, in: Gesammelte Werke 2, pp. 437-448; hier: p. 441.

[9] Arendt's understanding of "the human condition" which is obviously echoed in this definition is indeed exemplary for this core question of both pragmatist and hermeneutic philosophy.

of cognition and knowledge that correspond to them, is one of the crucial tasks both of American pragmatist as well as continental hermeneutic or cultural philosophy. The comprising concepts which define this peculiar complex of phenomena and questions are the concepts of “culture” and “objective spirit” in continental philosophy, and the concepts of “experience” and of “common sense” in its genuinely American counterparts. Although they bear significantly different implications in certain respects, particularly regarding their political significance, these concepts can nonetheless be understood as theoretical equivalences which profoundly connect the hermeneutic and the pragmatist philosophical enterprises.[10] The common ground of both perspectives is that they perceive “reality” in general, as far as it is the object of their philosophical reflection, primarily as “human” and that means: as “experienced” and “articulated” or as “cultural” reality. Their primary subject matter is the “world”, i. e. “reality” as far as it is penetrated by the symbols, meanings, experiences, histories of man.

In both philosophical traditions, furthermore, these questions result in the quest for a specific form of reflection that corresponds to this peculiar sort of philosophy the primary objects of which are cultural phenomena, experiences, meanings, and symbols. Consequently, the question if and how the “understanding” of such a *mediated reality* in the form of articulations and objectifications of experiences, of meanings and symbols is possible and what it implies particularly for the concept of “truth”, constitutes the common epistemological focus of American pragmatism and German hermeneutics.[11]

In the German tradition this question is characterized as the fundamental “hermeneutic problem”. One of the major aspects of this problem, which, as we will see, bears interesting political implications, is the so called “hermeneutic circle” as the peculiar pattern inherent in the attempt to understand “experiences”. Considered in hermeneutic terms, any articulation, any symbol is

[10] Dewey, for instance, emphasizes in a later self-comment on his major philosophical work *Experience and Nature*, that his pragmatist concept of “experience” can be more or less understood as an equivalent to the concept of “culture”. See Dewey: Experience and Nature, p. 361.

[11] See, for instance, William James: Pragmatism, New York (Dower Publ.) 1995, pp. 63 ff. and 76 ff. and Hans-Georg Gadamer: Truth and Method, London/New York (Continuum) 2004, pp. xxi ff.

by definition a meaningful *relation between* experiences of "things" or phenomena that appear within the "world". As such, any single meaning or experience is always embedded within a larger web of relations or pattern of meanings which altogether form the comprising "context" or "whole" of its constitutive relatedness. Consequently, "understanding" as the peculiar mode of cognition that corresponds to this peculiar pattern relatedness of cultural reality is the oscillating movement of the mind between the single parts and the comprising whole of such relations, the ongoing attempt to understand these two sides of the hermeneutic circle out of each other. A single experience, meaning or symbol can only be fully understood as an integral part of a comprising pattern of meaning, the "whole" of which in turn can only be understood by understanding its single parts. In hermeneutic terms, the "truth" of knowledge emerges from the oscillating movement of understanding between the parts and the whole of patterns of experience, and from the attempt to transform the oscillating into a spiraling movement in which the reciprocal understanding of the whole and the parts gradually and continuously improves, albeit without ever reaching a final conclusion that would transcend altogether the hermeneutic tension.

What Gadamer particularly focuses on in his peculiar understanding of the hermeneutic problem and the movement of understanding is, first, his argument (which he adopts from Heidegger) that this circular structure, this tension between parts and whole, describes not merely a "methodical", but rather an existential or, as he put it, an "ontological" problem.[12] The circular or spiraling structure of the process of understanding corresponds to the structure of reality in general as it is experienced by human beings. It is, thus, a "philosophical" problem of first rank which has to be taken into account in any attempt to describe any aspect of reality, also, for instance: political reality. On the basis of this generalization of the hermeneutic problem Gadamer, secondly, focuses on the concept of the "whole" involved in this problem – and particularly on its implications with regard to the "subject" of understanding. Which sorts of "contexts" primarily determine processes of understanding, and how exactly and to what extend do these contexts determine the perspective of an individual

[12] Gadamer: Truth and Method, pp. 267 ff.

pursuing the practice of understanding experiences? It is this question which Gadamer wants to bring out in its significance for the hermeneutic problem more clearly than his philosophical predecessors had done. For Gadamer, this question had been rather neglected and remained mostly unsolved in the hermeneutic tradition, primarily due to the impact of certain Kantian concepts and particularly due to the individualistic bias of Friedrich Schleiermacher's and Wilhelm Dilthey's philosophical perspectives. While Schleiermacher and Dilthey, as Gadamer argues, focused their attempt of hermeneutic understanding almost exclusively on the "reconstruction" of the unique personal perspectives of individual actors (as authors, for instance), Gadamer himself aims at restituting the significance of "integration" for the hermeneutic problem, i.e. the fact that any individual experience and its interpretation also regarding its subject is embedded within and to a certain degree always influenced and shaped by a context of common experience.[13] For Gadamer, the unsolved problem of hermeneutic philosophy therefore is the question of how the *subjective* fact of *individual experiences* can be theoretically connected with the *objective* reality of *common experience*.

As a consequence, also the movement of understanding itself for Gadamer has to more clearly be characterized in terms of "integration" into comprising patterns of meaning. The "art of understanding" not only aims at the comprehension of the experience of some other individual person, as Dilthey had particularly emphasized, but also more directly at a comprehension of the context itself and thus at some sort of attunement to the "sensus communis" of common experience. In the first part of *Truth and Method* Gadamer consequently emphasizes the importance of "common sense" or the "sensus communis" (as developed, for instance, in Gianni Battista Vico's philosophy of history) for the hermeneutic problem.[14] And he emphasizes the problematic consequences of the fact that the importance of this concept, and particularly its

[13] For the individualistic "reconstruction" of the hermeneutic problem as emphasized by Schleiermacher on the one hand and its "integration" into comprising contexts as emphasized by Hegel on the other as the two fundamental tasks of understanding see ibid., pp. 157 ff.
[14] Ibid., pp. 17 ff.

political implications,[15] got lost in German philosophy since Kant. The consequence of this intellectual development within the German philosophical tradition of hermeneutics is, as Gadamer points out, a problematic "privatization" of the ideas of experience (as "Erlebnis") and of understanding in which the fundamental fact that not only any symbol and its meaning by its very definition refers to a "context", but also that any individual experience or act of understanding is "integrated" in concrete patterns of common experience, of a "sensus communis", has been lost out of sight.[16]

In these passages of the first part of *Truth and Method* Gadamer also stresses, or he at least alludes to the crucial role of politics as an individual practice and of the peculiarly political contexts of "societies" and "states" for understanding the hermeneutic problem of the "whole". In fact, it is this major problem, so it seems in these passages, at which the problem of "the Political" comes into play.[17] In the more conceptual passages of the second part of *Truth and Method*, however, Gadamer does not come back to these political implications.[18] On the contrary, it seems as if in the pivotal second part of *Truth and Method* where Gadamer unfolds his original reconstruction of the hermeneutic problem, the question of politics is curiously avoided as a major problem. The reality of society as a political community is still emphasized, but it is treated as a necessary, yet rather opaque *a priori* of hermeneutics, as a premise which cannot be further theoretically clarified with regard to the hermeneutic processes of its constitution and its specific forms of meaning and symbolisms.

Instead, in his further argument for a "recovery of the fundamental hermeneutic problem" Gadamer shifts the focus away from politics towards the ideas of "history" and "language" in general and towards a corresponding idea of "tradition" as the given "horizon" in which any social practice of understanding is

[15] While the term sensus communis was, as Gadamer points out, at first present in the German philosophical discourse, it was "emptied of all political content" and therefore "lost its genuine critical significance." (Ibid., p. 24.)
[16] Ibid., pp. 29 ff.
[17] See particularly ibid., pp. 19 ff.
[18] Even in the passages where he interprets Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* and where he stresses its significance for his own hermeneutic conception, a discussion of the significance of the Polis as the peculiarly political context of *phronesis* or even a substantial reference to the concept of "sensus communis" is missing. (Ibid., pp. 309 ff.)

embedded. Within this setting, the specifically political realities of "society and state" are almost indiscriminately merged into the concepts of history, language, and tradition, with the effect of a rather apolitical, deterministic and traditionalist conception of understanding. While the idea of "integration" is still emphasized, its distinctly political implications that were at least implicitly present in the first part of *Truth and Method*, such as community, publicity, active participation or citizenship, seem to be forgotten. Aimed against Dilthey's individualistic bias, Gadamer now transforms the concept of understanding into a primarily socialized, historically embedded, yet almost historically determined intellectual process. Understanding now appears as the rather passive and primarily receptive cultural practice of an "Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen" (the individual practice of assimilating into the ongoing process of tradition).[19] In a famous passage in *Truth and Method* Gadamer criticizes Dilthey's neglect of the "whole" of historical reality and summarizes his own perspective as follows:

> „(Dilthey) started from the awareness of 'experiences' (Erlebnisse), (but) he was unable to build a bridge to the historical realities, because the great historical realities of society and state always have a predeterminate influence on any 'experience'. Self-reflection and autobiography – Dilthey's starting points – are not primary and are therefore not an adequate basis for the hermeneutical problem, because through them history is made private once more. In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being."[20]

Although the significance of the "historical realities of society and state" are once more emphasized here, they are still not theoretically and directly abridged

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[19] The translation of this famous formula of Gadamer in the English edition of *Truth and Method* at hand is misleading in my opinion: "Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition" (Gadamer: Truth and Method, p. 291.) To translate "Einrücken" with "to participate" in my opinion rather obscures the more passive and receptive connotations of the German term. And the translation of "Überlieferungsgeschehen" with "event of tradition" shifts the emphasis of the term away from the implications of continuity and constancy to implications of situativeness and spontaneity it does not as strongly have in the German original. For the German version see Gadamer: Wahrheit und Methode, in: Gesammelte Werke Bd. 1, Tübingen (Mohr) 1990, p. 295: „Das Verstehen ist selber nicht so sehr als eine Handlung der Subjektivität zu denken, sondern als Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen".

[20] Gadamer: Truth and Method, p. 278.

with individual experience but rather identified with or even merged into the all comprising and “closed circuits of historical life”. Consequently, what is lacking in Gadamer’s philosophy, is the awareness that “societies and states”, if politically understood, are peculiarly political phenomena and as such less “closed” than “open circuits” or better: open patterns of meaning permanently evolving and actively changing themselves within political practices of deliberation, judgment and decision. What Gadamer therefore rather neglects as major theoretical problems, are the most crucial questions of politics, such as the significance of political freedom and political participation, but also of genuinely political authority and legitimacy, the concept of citizenship, the deliberate (individual and collective) shaping and reshaping of ideas and institutions and the role of individual “judgments” within these processes (as analyzed in Arendt’s late work).

What is finally and consequently neglected in Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy is the most fundamental question of political theory: the question of *what politics is* in the first place, how the concept of the Political can be determined if hermeneutically understood. From the perspective of political theory it is primarily this question which would have to be answered in order to “build a bridge” between individual and common experience, between the “subjective act” of individual understanding and the objective “historical realities of society and state”. In sum, it seems that Hannah Arendt’s following critical comment on Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic philosophy in a lecture she delivered to the American Political Science Association in 1954 on the topic of the “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought” holds true for Gadamer’s perspective as well:

> „(Heidegger´s) conceptual framework is better prepared to understand history than to lay the groundwork of a new political philosophy. This seems to be the reason why it is highly sensitive to general trends of the time, to all the modern problems that can be best understood in historical terms, such as the technicalization of the world, the emergence of one world on a planetary scale, the increasing pressure of society upon the individual, and the concomitant atomization of society. Meanwhile, the more permanent questions of political science which, in a sense, are more specifically

> philosophic – such as, What is politics? Who is man as a political being? What is freedom? – seem to have been forgotten altogether."[21]

With respect to this apolitical tendency, indeed also Gadamer is an exemplary case. And his neglect of the political problem indicates a blank space within the European, predominantly German tradition of hermeneutic theory in general. This is one reason why Dewey's and Arendt's rather unsystematic and not always very clearly articulated applications of various hermeneutic concepts and ideas are particularly interesting. For by integrating them into their general perspectives of a distinctly *democratic* philosophy (Dewey) or a distinctly *political* theory (Arendt), they most clearly bring to the fore precisely those political implications of the hermeneutic problem that in most parts of the classical European hermeneutic theory are either completely neglected or, at best (as in Gadamer), only vaguely intimated, yet eventually indiscriminately merged into theories of history, language and the like.

There is an important aspect of Gadamer's argument, however, which nonetheless is particularly instructive for the hermeneutic-political problem. In spite of the rather vague character of Gadamer's reflections on the Political, they, as we have seen, quite clearly locate this problem at a certain point, as it were, within the "hermeneutic universe" (within reality as experience). For Gadamer the political problem apparently is intimately connected with the "whole" of common experience, with the question of how this "whole" as the common horizon of understanding is constituted and how it can be bridged with individual experience, viz.: how and in which sense individuals "participate" or are "integrated" into this "whole". It is the same point, as we will see, at which also Dewey and Arendt locate the problem of political understanding. Yet, while they agree with Gadamer regarding the localization of the political problem, their distinct focus on this problem does not only more clearly bring out the significance of "sensus communis" and of "society" and "state". Their distinctly political focus at the same time also fundamentally changes the understanding of the hermeneutic problem in general, and it results in a significantly different concept of the "whole" implied in this general problem.

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[21] Hannah Arendt: Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought, in: Hannah Arendt: Essays in Understanding 1930-1954. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn, New York (Schocken) 1994, pp. 428-447; here: p. 433.

II. Politics as Experience and Understanding

In Dewey's and Arendt's works, the theoretical emphases regarding the relation between politics and understanding are distributed almost exactly in the opposite way than in Gadamer. Their focus clearly lies on the Political, and the problem of understanding comes into sight as an implication, as it were, of genuinely political questions. Yet, seen before the comparative hermeneutic background sketched here in the first chapter, the far-reaching significance of the problem of understanding for Dewey's and Arendt's conceptions of politics nonetheless clearly comes to the fore. The various political-hermeneutic implications in Dewey's and Arendt's works can at first be summarized in the very general idea that politics and political action is founded on a particular cognitive, or intellectual, or most generally put: on a specific "cultural" basis which consists of a peculiar common practice of experiencing and interpreting reality. Described in hermeneutic terms, "the Political" is nothing but a particular mode of thinking about things, a distinct mode of experiencing and interpreting reality. It denotes the peculiar form of the "experience" and the "thinking of citizens", as one of Arendt's interpreters felicitously put it.[22] The "strange enterprise" of "understanding" as a peculiar "form of cognition, distinct from many others", as Arendt herself characterizes it in her early Essay on "Understanding and Politics", is nothing else than "the other side of action" and particularly of political action.[23] Or, as Dewey puts it in a very similar way in his major philosophical work on *Experience and Nature*: "Ideas" in the experiential sense of the term are "the obverse side of action".[24] For both thinkers the cognitive or experiential side of politics is "understanding".

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[22] Melvin Hill: The Fictions of Mankind and the Stories of Men, in: Melvin Hill (Ed.): Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World, New York (St. Martin's) 1979, pp. 275-300; here: p. 277.

[23] Arendt: Understanding and Politics, pp. 321 f.

[24] Dewey: Experience and Nature, p. 263. Dewey's fundamental book on *Experience and Nature* can be understood as his peculiarly pragmatist variant of a comprising philosophy of culture. It is therefore the most important of Dewey's writings with regard to the questions discussed in the following.

Thus, the Political, if it does not primarily consist of, it is at least substantially based on a certain mode of hermeneutic rationality. And this particular mode of rationality for Arendt and Dewey can be clearly distinguished from other modes of experience, interpretation, and rationality. It can be distinguished because of its peculiar structures or forms of meaning, its peculiar forms of symbolisms, and because of its peculiar cultural functions or effects within societies. As much as for Dewey, whose pragmatist perspective generally emphasizes that any form of cognition is embedded within practical contexts of acting upon reality and therefore always to a certain degree implies the active shaping and altering of reality,[25] also for Arendt the practice of political understanding is, in a certain sense, a "creative"[26] practice with an immediately practical aim: Understanding "is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world."[27]

Due to this practical motivation of "making" oneself at home in the world, understanding has peculiar evocative effects, it results in peculiar practical "products", as it were. These evocative effects or creations can be characterized as genuinely political meaningful structures and cultural patterns. And these peculiarly political patterns are located in Dewey and Arendt precisely at the blank space of Gadamer's perception of the hermeneutic problem: Political understanding is the specific hermeneutic practice that constitutes the meaningful unity of "societies" and "states". It is the particular practice of experiencing and interpreting reality politically, viz. the practice to "perceive and understand what happens in the world" in the citizen's mode of experience,[28] by which societies as politically meaningful units are constituted in the first place.[29] Societies as political "communities" (politische "Mitwelten") are

[25] This general pragmatist principle holds true also for "understanding" as a peculiar mode of cognition. See, for instance, Dewey: Experience and Nature, p. 186, where "understanding" is widely identified with the "power to regulate".
[26] The adjective "creative" is, as we will see, applicable here only in a restricted sense of the term: "Creation" in political terms has to be understood in a non-instrumental sense, namely as "self-creation". See here below p. 14 ff.
[27] Arendt: Understanding and Politics, p. 308.
[28] Hill: The Fictions of Mankind and the Stories of Men, p. 277.
[29] It is in this sense action and understanding which constitutes the spaces of public and community (Arendt: The Human Condition, pp. 175) and which forms a self-conscious political public out of the merely instrumental relations of societies (John Dewey: The Public and its Problems, Athens (Swallow Press/Ohio University Press) 1991, pp. 110 ff.).

nothing else but the cultural objectifications of this peculiar mode of the citizen's experience and interpretation of reality. Or to put it differently: Political communities are the specific cultural manifestations, the historical reifications of common experience. Societies as meaningful units are the other side, as it were, the objective side of "common sense". They exist *because* and *as long as* they are experienced within a common civic practice of understanding reality, or, as I want to call it: within the civic practice of political hermeneutics.

Thus, for both thinkers political understanding appears as something like the fundamental symbolic "life function" of societies as political communities, and this function determines the shape of the specific symbolic forms involved and generated in it. Political understanding and political symbols have specific features. And these features further characterize the experience of citizenship and distinguish it as a peculiar mode of experience and understanding. Three aspects are particularly important:

1. At first, political understanding, in spite of its "creative" or evocative effects, has to be critically distinguished from all forms of instrumental reason. Dewey focuses on this question, for instance, in his study on *The Public and its Problems*. In order to bring out the peculiar meaningful pattern of a political public, Dewey sharply distinguishes the concept of "society" as a merely instrumental pattern of social relations and institutions from the concept of "community" as a meaningful unity in the political sense of the term. For Dewey, only the latter as a peculiarly non-instrumental pattern of meanings and relations can serve as the necessary basis of an open and functioning political public.[30] Arendt reflects on the same question in *The Human Condition* when she distinguishes between "work" which is based on instrumental rationality and "action" the other side of which is, as we have seen, understanding as a principally different form of reasoning with principally different practical implications. As Arendt frequently emphasizes, public spaces, the political realm

[30] Dewey: The Public and its Problems, pp. 116 ff. See also the instructive reflections in James Campbell: Dewey's Conception of Community, in: Larry A. Hickman (Ed.): Reading Dewey. Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation, Bloomington/Indianapolis (Indiana University Press) 1998, pp. 23-42 and in Richard Bernstein: Community in the Pragmatic Tradition, in: Morris Dickstein (Ed.): The Revival of Pragmatism. New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture, Durham/London (Duke University Press) 1998, pp. 141-156.

in general, is constituted by "action", not by "working".[31] Political communities are cultural objectifications, artifacts, as it were, insofar as "man" is incontestably "the creator of the state", as Eric Voegelin put it in one of his early writings.[32] They are not, however, "made" or "fabricated" in an instrumental sense of the term, they rather are "enacted".[33] Their cognitive form is shaped by the attempt to find one's place within such enactments, an attempt of reasonable orientation, as it were, rather than by the instrumental rationale of means and ends.

Instead of being primarily concerned with means and ends, understanding has a peculiarly *self-reflective structure*. It is the intellectual attempt to grasp one's place within reality,[34] not primarily to realize a certain end by attaining and using appropriate means. Action and understanding, therefore, are performative in nature, they do not primarily aim at the realization of an end that lies outside of themselves.[35] The primary aim of action (and understanding) rather is the realization of itself as a particular mode or potential of human practice. In Arendt, this idea of the peculiarly self-reflective form of political action is based on her interpretation of the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *poesis*.[36] In Dewey, it rather is a consequence of his evolutionary theory of society.[37] The result is, in spite of these significantly different theoretical orientations, very similar: Political action appears as an end in itself. Consequently, also political

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[31] Arendt: The Human Condition, pp. 199 ff.

[32] Eric Voegelin: Race and State, CW Vol. 2. Edited by Klaus Vondung, Baton Rouge/London (Louisiana University Press) 1997, p. 7.

[33] See, for instance, Arendt: The Human Condition, p. 181. Thus, one could say that understood as a human artifice, or as a "work of art", political communities have the shape of a play rather than that of an "opus". The rationale of politics, thus, is "performative" and "interpretative" rather than directly "creative" in an instrumental sense of the term.

[34] See the quotation from Arendt's article on *Understanding and Politics* above (page 13) and the very similar formulations in Dewey: Experience and Nature, p. 128 f.: "Knowledge is a word of various meanings. Etymologically, 'science' may signify tested and authentic instance of knowledge. But knowledge has also a meaning more liberal and more humane. It signifies events understood, events so discriminately penetrated by thought that mind is literally at home in them. (…) (W)hat makes any proposition scientific is its power to yield understanding, insight, intellectual at-homeness."

[35] Dewey even tries to generalize this peculiar structure in his general "theory of valuation" in which "means" and "ends" in general appear as the reciprocally connected parts within a process of action that integrates them into one comprising meaningful whole. See, for instance, Dewey: Theory of Valuation, in: Later Works 13, pp. 189 ff. and Dewey: Experience and Nature, particularly pp. 100 ff. and 266 ff.

[36] Arendt: The Human Condition, pp. 195 f.

[37] See the general outline of his evolutionary perspective in Dewey: The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy, in: Middle Works Vol. 4, pp. 3 ff.

meanings or symbols have a peculiarly self-reflective and performative structure.

2. How this self-reflective and performative form of understanding can be more concretely conceived becomes clearer if we relate it to the fact of the peculiarly evocative effects of understanding. This relation reveals another characteristic by which genuinely political symbols and political processes of cultural objectification and by which the genuinely political meaningful structures of societies can be distinguished from any other cultural forms: Its self-reflective, performative and evocative traits combined, “political hermeneutics” (or: the experience of citizenship) reveals itself as the peculiar practice of self-constitution of societies by the symbolic means of self-interpretation.

This also clarifies in which sense political understanding, while being a distinctly non-instrumental form of rationality, nonetheless bears “creative” results. The “creative” or evocative effects of political symbols or meanings do not so much, or at least they do not directly refer to the various *objects* they indicate, but rather to the idea of the *subject* itself which they evoke. The practice of experiencing and interpreting reality politically does refer to aspects of reality as objects, but it primarily *creates* or *constitutes* or *evokes* a peculiar perspective out of which these aspects of reality are experienced. Since this peculiar perspective would not exist without the performative act of political self-interpretation, it is this very perspective, the perspective of citizenship, which is the primary result of understanding as a creative and evocative practice. Rather than cultural artifacts in terms of “objects”, political communities as the peculiar “products”, “creations” or objectifications of common sense are primarily *perspectives* of *subjects*. And they are not “ends” in the instrumental sense of the term, but rather “ends in themselves”. The “creations” of political understanding thus are “self-creations” of peculiar perspectives and subjects.

This has a further important implication. No matter which part of reality is the object of political experience and interpretation – and in principle everything, every aspect of reality can be experienced politically –, this object is always conceived in a peculiarly indirect manner. Due to the self-reflective mode of

political understanding, the primary *object* of political interpretation is rather given in the *subject* of the interpretation itself. Or to put it differently: The primary content of the genuinely political mode of the experience of citizens, no matter which aspect of reality forms its object, is always, as it were, the experience of citizenship itself. What constitutes a "public", as Dewey points out, is its self-perception as such, the fact that it recognizes itself as being a public.[38] The constitutive premise of a "community" is that it is clearly conscious of itself.[39]

3. Thus, the *differencia specifica* of "the Political" as a form of understanding lies in its peculiarly self-creative reference towards the subject of interpretation and its somewhat "indirect" perception of reality resulting from it. And it, thirdly, lies in the specific type of "subjectivity" it evokes. The question of the peculiar idea of subjectivity inherent in the cultural patterns of commonly shared meanings and symbols that constitute the comprising "whole" of common experience, is in general of great importance within hermeneutic philosophy, particularly since Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Heidegger himself answers this question with the famous pronominal metaphor of "They" ("Man"), which he gives a distinctly pejorative tone in order to emphasize the necessity of individual emancipation from any common sense experience.[40] Gadamer, on the contrary, by the metaphor of "Thou",[41] describes the structure of subjectivity inherent within the comprising whole of "tradition" as it is experienced in understanding in a distinctly affirmative, yet at the same time in a somewhat deterministic, at least conservative tone.

Dewey and Arendt try to grasp the same problem in distinctly political terms.[42] Their question, thus, is: Which peculiar perspective in terms of its inherent idea of subjectivity is implied in, and even actually evoked and created by the genuinely political experience of citizens? As a consequence of this distinctly

[38] Dewey: The Public and its Problems, p. 146.
[39] Ibid., p. 149.
[40] Martin Heidegger: Sein und Zeit, 18th Edition, Tübingen (Niemeyer) 2001: pp. 113 ff., 180 ff., 267 ff.
[41] Gadamer: Truth and Method, pp. 352 f.
[42] They both raise the question of the particular type of subjectivity inherent in the meanings that build up the complex symbolic pattern of *political communities*. Who tells the stories, one could ask with Arendt, by which a concrete society and its political tradition is constituted? Or at least: How can this idea of political subjectivity or authorship be described analytically?

political accent, Dewey's and Arendt's answer to this question has significantly different implications than Heidegger's "Man" and Gadamer's "Thou". They also use a pronominal metaphor to analytically describe the form of the political subject implied in political experiences and symbols. Yet, their specific metaphor shifts the emphasis away from Heidegger's anti-political existentialist individualism as much as from Gadamer's deterministic traditionalism in favor of a more authentically political understanding of the problem that more clearly integrates the issues of "openness", "plurality", and active "participation". Given the cultural reality of concrete societies organizing and understanding themselves as political communities in a common practice of citizenship, it turns out that the peculiar idea of subjectivity inherent in and evoked by the respective political mode of experience and interpretation is neither an anonymous "They" nor an authoritative "Thou", but rather: "We". Common sense and its peculiar cultural objectifications (viz.: political communities) imply the specific pronominal form of the First Person Plural.[43]

In Dewey's writings this argument mostly is rather implied than explicitly articulated. It explicitly occurs, though, in the pivotal passage of *The Public and its Problems*. In his attempt to demonstrate that the constitution of a political public within a society has to be understood as a symbolic, interpretative process of self-constitution, Dewey in the 5th chapter of the study comes to the following conclusion:

> „Associated activity needs no explanation; things are made that way. But no amount of aggregated collective action of itself constitutes a community. For beings who observe and think, and whose ideas are absorbed by impulses and become sentiments and interests, 'we' is as inevitable as 'I'. But 'we' and 'our' exist only when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort, just as 'I' and 'mine' appear on the scene only when a distinctive share in mutual action is consciously asserted or claimed."[44]

[43] The major significance of the pronominal form of the First Person Plural for understanding political problems has been emphasized also by other authors and in other respects. See, for instance, Roger Scruton: The First Person Plural, in: Ronald Beiner (Ed.): Theorizing Nationalism, Albany (State University of New York Press), pp. 279-293, David A. Hollinger: How wide the circle of the "We"? American Intellectuals and the Problem of the Ethnos since World War II, in: The American Historical Review 98 (1993), pp. 317-337 and Benjamin Barber: Strong Democracy. Participatory Politics for a New Age, 2nd Edition, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London (University of California Press) 2003, particularly pp. 163 ff.

[44] Dewey: The Public and its Problems, pp. 151 f.

The whole of "society", in order to be a political "community", "demands communication as a prerequisite", in which the common ground of common "signs", "symbols", and "meanings"[45] are permanently constituted, reaffirmed and altered. The crucial point, however, is that the various "contents" of this process of communicating as well as the principal form or structure of those common political symbols and meanings generated in it in a sense all imply and evoke the fundamental idea of the community of citizens as the *plural subject* of its self-interpretation. The political symbolisms and meanings within a concrete society, no matter which concrete "objects" or "facts" or political "problems" they refer to and no matter how pluralistic and controversial their respective interpretations may be, always have one common content: They always evoke the perspective of the society as a "We" from which these "objects", "facts", or "problems" are experienced and interpreted.

The same argument can be found in Arendt's political theory. She even more explicitly than Dewey underscores the pivotal significance of the problem of the peculiarly political form of subjectivity by characterizing it as "the great unknown … that has baffled political philosophy from its beginning".[46] This problem is in my opinion implicitly present in the whole chapter on "action" in *The Human Condition*. It can be seen, for instance, as the reason why Arendt characterizes the structure of public discourse as being strangely circular and aimless.[47] The "endless palaver of the agora" as described by Arendt even appears to be completely void of any concrete content to some of Arendt's interpreters: "What keeps these citizens together as a body? (...) What is it that they talk about in the endless palaver of the agora?", as Hannah Pitkin critically notes with regard to the respective passages in *The Human Condition*.[48] In terms of Arendt's political hermeneutics the answer would be that the experience of citizenship is not void of any content. Civic talk is not about nothing but rather potentially about everything. Yet, for this very reason that political talk and understanding

[45] Ibid., pp. 152 f.
[46] Arendt: The Human Condition, pp. 184 f.
[47] See particularly Arendt: The Human Condition, pp. 182 ff. and the respective interpretation in Villa: Arendt and Heidegger, pp. 36 ff.
[48] Hannah F. Pitkin: Justice: On Relating Private and Public, in: Political Theory 9 (1981), pp. 327-352, here: p. 336.

can be indiscriminately aimed at everything in terms of content, it is not the contents from which it derives its specific character. Its *differencia specifica* instead is the fact that any civic discourse as much as any content or object if *politically* perceived, articulated or symbolized is penetrated with the concurrent self-reflective experience that it is "We, the people", as it were, who are experiencing, talking, and interpreting.

Arendt's explicit perspective on this question, however, is not coherent throughout her work. The explicit answer she gives in *The Human Condition* resembles Heidegger's rather than Dewey's position on political subjectivity, and it seems unsatisfactory for various reasons. In the pivotal chapter 25 of *The Human Condition*, Arendt's answer is that the "subject" implied in and evoked by the numerous stories, ideas and symbols of which political communities as meaningful patterns consist is: "nobody". The idea of an identifiable "subject" of the "stories" that constitute communities here appears as "an invention arising from a mental perplexity but corresponding to no real experience."[49] Political narratives, symbols, and meanings, thus, are, with respect to the idea of subjectivity they imply, peculiarly anonymous in nature.

This solution not only resembles the idea of the anonymous "Man" ("They") which Heidegger in *Being and Time* pejoratively identifies as the "author" of the meaning of common, everyday existence and experience. What makes Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition* particularly unsatisfactory is the fact that it also resembles Arendt's own characterization of the bureaucratic "rule by nobody" in her study on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.[50] There Arendt connects the anonymity of meanings with mere "consumption", "fabrication", and "alienation" rather than with "politics", "citizenship", "common sense" and "freedom". In her study on totalitarianism Arendt consequently identifies the "rule of nobody" as one of the "greatest threats to freedom in our time."[51]

[49] Ibid., p. 185.
[50] See Hannah Arendt: The Origins of Totalitarianism, San Diego/New York/London (Harcourt) 1976, pp. 185 ff. and 207 ff.
[51] See Hill: The Fictions of Mankind and the Stories of Men, pp. 277 f.

Considering these conceptual difficulties, it is not surprising, that the metaphor of "nobody" (which by the way also resembles Jürgen Habermas's characterization of "inter-subjectivity"[52]) does not remain Arendt's last word in this respect. In her later writings, when she comes back to this question, she answers it with the same pronominal metaphor with which Dewey characterizes the shape of political publics: "Action is a we (and not an I)", as Arendt apodictically states in an interview from 1973,[53] and as she more theoretically demonstrates particularly in her last book. In the final chapter of the second part of *The Life of the Mind* Arendt connects her reflections on the various modes in which the human mind experiences reality in general and on the mode of "Willing" in particular with an interpretation of the American Founding. As Arendt had already noted in *On Revolution*, the paradigmatic nature of the historical experience of the American Revolution for Arendt primarily lies in the fact that the Founders of the American Republic had rediscovered "the elementary grammar of political action and its more complicated syntax, whose rules determine the rise and fall of human power."[54] In her study on *Willing* now she eventually identifies the peculiar pronominal form of the First Person Plural as one the most fundamental rules of this "complicated syntax" of politics and power. The "true plural of (political) action" which is "paradigmatic for the political sphere" is not "the faceless 'They'" ("Man"), as Arendt here explicitly emphasizes against Heidegger's anti-political hermeneutic philosophy, but "We".[55] It is this peculiar form of subjectivity implied in political action and understanding which integrates the plurality of politics into a comprising pattern and therewith constitutes the meaningful "whole" of political communities:

> "The only trait that all (the) various forms and shapes of human plurality have in common is the simple fact (…) that at some moment in time and for some reason a group of people must have come to think of themselves as a 'We'. No matter how this 'We' is first experienced and articulated, it seems that it always needs a beginning, and nothing seems so shrouded in darkness and mystery as that 'In the beginning', not only of the human

[52] See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas: Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Zwölf Vorlesungen, Frankfurt a. M. (Suhrkamp) 1988, p. 177.
[53] A German translation of the "Interview with Roger Errera" is to be found in Hannah Arendt: Ich will verstehen. Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk, München/Zürich (Piper) 2005, pp.116-133, here: p. 122.
[54] Hannah Arendt: On Revolution, London (Farber and Farber) 1963, p.173.
[55] Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind, Part Two: Willing, New York/London (Harcourt Brace) 1978, pp. 200 f.

> species as distinguished from other living organisms, but also of the enormous variety of indubitably human societies."[56]

The peculiar idea of subjectivity inherent in political understanding and in political symbols is the idea of a *plural subject*. Common sense, as it were, has the pronominal form of "We".

This quite original conception of plural subjectivity has a number of interesting consequences. As was already mentioned, it seems to be particularly apt to integrate the ideas of individuality, plurality, discussion, controversy, and active participation into the idea of society as a nonetheless meaningful and comprising political "whole". It highlights, furthermore, the fundamental significance in political theory of the concept of "Founding" and of the concrete historical experience of political foundation as "the supreme act in which the 'We' is constituted as an identifiable entity."[57] In Arendt's reflections at the end of *The Life of the Mind* it also appears as the peculiar syntax of authentic politics in which negative and positive freedom, individual liberty and independence on the one hand, the dependence of human existence and of individual freedom from "community" on the other hand are brought together. Being neither identical with "inter-subjectivity", nor with "collectivity", the concept of plural subjectivity somehow locates the political subject *in between* society as a whole and the individual citizens. The latter on the one hand appear as the numerous parts of the whole of society and insofar as dependent in their individual practice of citizenship from the "whole" of common experience. On the other hand however, they cannot be reduced to mere parts or functions of community because their individual practice of political action and understanding permanently constitutes and reconstitutes the "whole" of community and common experience in the first place. In the pronominal metaphor of "We", the whole (expressed in the "First Person") appears as dependent from its parts (expressed in the adjective "plural") as vice versa.[58]

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[56] Ibid.: p. 202.
[57] Ibid.: p. 203.
[58] Another interesting consequence of Dewey's and Arendt's hermeneutic conceptions of politics cannot be discussed here in detail, yet should be at least briefly mentioned. Due to the peculiar characteristics of political understanding questions of authority and legitimacy, and particularly universalistic ideas of legitimacy, affirm a very peculiar, somewhat paradoxical form once they are articulated in the mode of the Political. Arendt, for instance, reflects on this problem in her study *On Revolution* when she interprets the *Declaration of Independence* and

In a way, this concept of the political subject could be understood as the genuinely political interpretation of the hermeneutic circle. The fundamental tension between parts and whole does not only constitute “meaning” within the cultural objects of experience. In the peculiar form of political understanding the same tension reoccurs within the meaningful structure of the subject of experience and interpretation itself: This subject is permanently constituted within the tension between the parts and the whole of a “First Person Plural”, the *whole* of which only exists in its numerous parts of individual and independent citizens and their experiences and interpretations, yet nonetheless constitutes – *e pluribus unum*, as it were – the real fact of a political society as a meaningful unity.

Finally, this hermeneutic understanding of the political subject and of politics in general has also significant consequences for the question of the relation between politics thus understood and philosophy or theory. With regard to this question Dewey and Arendt, although they somewhat share a common starting point also in this respect, eventually draw substantially different conclusions. In the following last chapter I want to very briefly sketch some of these conclusions.

III. Political Understanding and Critique

To understand citizenship primarily as a particular form of experience, reasoning and understanding as has been done so far, quite obviously suggests that the question of the relation of civic experience towards genuinely theoretical or philosophical forms of experience, reasoning and understanding is

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stresses the paradoxical syntactic and symbolic form of the sentence “*We hold* these truths to be self-evident”. (See Arendt: On Revolution, pp. 192 ff.) On this highly interesting passage of *On Revolution* see also B. Honig: Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic, in: American Political Science Review 85 (1991), pp. 97-113. In this context, by the way, Arendt seems to describe similar phenomena than Eric Voegelin’s concept of “transcendent representation” in the *New Science of Politics* tries to analyze. (See Eric Voegelin: The New Science of Politics, Chicago/London (University of Chicago Press) 1987, particularly pp. 52 ff.)

of the utmost importance to fully grasp its implications. Regarding this question Dewey's and Arendt's respective arguments eventually take fundamentally different directions. The answer to this question depends on the thinkers' understanding of the premises and of the function of critical thinking. And this understanding of "critique" apparently depends on the thinkers' concrete experiences with politics. Whereas Dewey's respective position is based on his conspicuous democratic optimism, Arendt's more ambivalent and skeptical position clearly mirrors the experience of totalitarianism.

For Dewey, the "social consciousness"[59] of a democratic public, as long as it is solidly grounded on a vivid communication and on the symbolically articulated, self-reflective idea of the society as a "We" sharing the common meaning and experience of citizenship, is almost by necessity also an open and a self-critical public or social consciousness.[60] As a consequence, for Dewey, "political hermeneutics" as an intellectual practice of (democratic) citizens on the one hand and as a critical hermeneutic theory or philosophy of politics on the other hand are more or less identical. For Dewey, the experience of citizenship, as long as it is also a "democratic" form of experience, by definition is both: self-creative *and* self-critical at the same time. In his conception of a distinctly "democratic philosophy", Dewey consequently merges politics, philosophy, religion and theoretical reasoning into the one comprising democratic creed which constitutes the American society as a meaningful whole. Critical thinking for Dewey is an integral part of the common democratic practice of political understanding, of political self-interpretation.[61] His own democratic philosophy, consequently, can be understood as the conscious and continual attempt to actively and critically, but nonetheless to participate into the "Überlieferungsgeschehen" (the continuous meaningful process of unfolding) of the "We" which is the plural subject of American democracy and the American political tradition.

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[59] Dewey: The Public and its Problems, p .153.

[60] See, for instance, Dewey's definition of „democracy" as opposed to "despotism" in John Dewey: Democracy and Education, New York (Free Press) 1966, pp. 81 ff.

[61] See particularly Dewey: Philosophy and Democracy, in: Middle Works Vol. 11, pp. 40-53, also Dewey: Philosophy and American National Life, in: Middle Works Vol 3, pp. 73-78 and Dewey: Experience and Nature, pp. 295 ff.

Arendt's position towards tradition and even towards politics in general is far more ambiguous than Dewey's. Due to her totalitarian experience, the question of "critique" for Arendt has far more existential implications than it appears to have in Dewey. And this is mirrored in her conception of understanding which itself is more ambiguous, "dialectic", somehow twofold. For Arendt, the specific "self-creative" power of the experience of citizenship and political understanding necessarily implies certain limits with regard to its abilities of self-critique. Being the "life-function" of societies, the critical potentials of political understanding necessarily finds its limits in the political idea of "society" itself. To be sure, for Arendt there is room for controversy and plurality within political understanding. Indeed, plurality is the very core of political action, it is the fundamental aspect of the human condition action is specifically related to. Consequently, also the stories told in public discourse which constitute the public sphere and the political community in its concrete historical form are themselves pluralistic, different, controversial. In terms of content they do not necessarily converge into one dominant big story about the identity of a concrete political society. The question of who "We" actually are (to use Samuel Huntington's phrase) can be and empirically is highly controversial even within solidly constituted political societies. Political understanding consequently can also be based on primarily critical intentions with regard to certain, maybe even to the currently dominant interpretations of "us".[62] But the mere fact *that* the meaningful unity of society exists – viz. that the experience of citizenship actually refers to some reality – is a necessary premise which political understanding cannot critically transcend without losing its specific meaning and its evocative power. Herein, in the constant hermeneutic civil "self-creation" as an indispensable premise of political meaning (and common sense) altogether, lie the inherent limits of civil self-critique. The "creative" form which the civil mode of "self-reflection" necessarily assumes is not easily and only to a certain degree comparable with a distinctly and unsparingly analytical and critical form of "self-reflection".

[62] Since the issue of the „disclosure of the acting and speaking agent" (Arendt: The Human Condition, p. 182) actually is – due to its self-reflective structure – the primary and constant "object" of political understanding, its "identity" can therefore, if only for logical reasons, never be finally clarified or answered.

What is more, due to its specific evocative powers and its inherent limits of self-critique, political understanding also has its specific potential of degeneration. For Arendt, the intrinsic danger of the political form of experiencing reality is that it has the potential to degenerate into ideological and even totalitarian forms. The "mob" spreading through imperialistic Europe in the 19th century, for instance, the nationalistic and racist identities dominating European politics at that time, for Arendt are nothing but inversed "caricatures" of political unity and action.[63] "Ideology" as the distinctly totalitarian mode of experiencing reality is nothing else but a degeneration of political experience itself, a pathological form of political understanding in which its evocative power is hypostatized either into the idea of an insight into the necessary "laws of history" yet to be realized and executed by the totalitarian mass movements or into the idea of the unlimited possibilities of human power, imagination and creativity.[64] For Arendt, totalitarianism is literally a pathology – and therefore a constant possibility – of the Political. It is the "abyss of freedom" in which the self-creative power of political understanding turns into its opposite, into the self-destructive power of ideology.

Seen before this background it is not surprising that for Arendt the civic practice of political hermeneutics on the one hand and political theory as its critical theoretical counterpart, or in short: that politics and philosophy are not completely identical but have to be at least gradually distinguished from each other. Arendt is well-known as a determined critic of the philosophical tradition. And she criticizes philosophy precisely because it claims for itself a "transcendent" position and conceives itself as being ultimately independent from any concrete society and its common experience. But she nonetheless herself refused to identify "theory" and "politics".[65] Like Dewey, also Arendt explicitly locates political theory in the midst of the political realm. The basis of political theory is the common ground of "our" political experience. Yet, at the same time, in order to be able to attain a substantially critical perspective, political theory has to constantly try to at least gradually emancipate itself from

[63] See Arendt: The Origins of Totalitarianism, pp. 106 ff., 158 ff. and 222 ff.
[64] Ibid., pp. 341 ff. and 460 ff.
[65] See, for instance, Arendt's respective reflections during a discussion in Toronto in Arendt: On Hannah Arendt, in: Hill (Ed.): Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World, pp. 301-339.

the practical political mode of experience and interpretation which constitutes the symbolic "life function" of any political community.[66]

Political theory, thus, is "conceived for the purpose of political action",[67] but it is not itself immediate political action in the sense sketched in this paper. Consequently, also the cognitive structures of political action and political theory are not identical. The function of the theoretical mode of understanding, of experiencing and interpreting reality is not only, and maybe not even primarily, to participate in the hermeneutic processes of self-interpretation and therewith self-constitution of societies as political communities. Its peculiar and primary function rather is *critique*, pretty much in the Kantian sense of the term: as a critical reflection of the premises of the possibility of the Political. Political theory is founded on the common experiences of politics, but it ultimately is a reflection not so much *in* but rather *on* the political mode of experiencing and understanding reality, on its peculiar symbolic forms, its premises and also on its peculiar limits. Thus, against Dewey's idea of a distinctly democratic philosophy, Arendt claims the principal possibility and principal legitimacy of a political theory that is constituted by the continual attempt to gradually emancipate itself from the constitutive hermeneutic form of political self-interpretation of societies.

Although Arendt is not always very clear regarding the relation between politics and philosophy and although she rather tried to avoid than to explicitly clarify this question with regard to the status of her own political theory, the peculiar position I just outlined is nonetheless discernable, particularly in her more intimate interpretations of single philosophers, authors, and poets.[68] In my opinion, this peculiar position can be understood as an attempt of a European-American synthesis with regard to the question of the structure, the scope, the

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[66] Dana Villa describes Arendt's consciously ambiguous position in this respect as her most peculiar attitude of "alienated citizenship". See Dana Villa: Sokrates, Lessing, and Thoreau: The Image of Alienated Citizenship in Hannah Arendt, in: Austin Sarat/Dana Villa (Eds.): Liberal Modernism and Democratic Individuality. George Kateb and the Practices of Politics, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1996, pp. 47-63.

[67] Arendt: Willing, p. 216.

[68] Pivotal sources in this respect are the essays published in *Men in Dark Times*, particularly the essays on Lessing, Jaspers, and Heidegger, but also the ones on Luxemburg, Dinesen, Broch, and Brecht. (See Hannah Arendt: Men in Dark Times, San Diego/New York/London (Harcourt Brace & Company) 1983.

legitimacy and the limits of political understanding and common experience. And it can be understood as exemplary for the peculiar tradition of German-American political philosophy in the 20th century in general. It resembles Eric Voegelin's and also, though with certain reservations, Leo Strauss's respective positions. What makes Arendt's original contribution to this question particularly interesting is the fact that her parting from a Deweyian solution of the problem of philosophy and politics appears somewhat unintended. It seems as if Arendt only reluctantly and successively discovered the limits of political understanding in the course of her lifelong attempt to formulate a critical political theory that at first should solely and exclusively be founded on the political mode of experience. Her political theory, thus, seems to be a critical reflection *from within* common experience, as it were: a self-critique of political understanding that consciously remains grounded in the common experiences of the Political, yet at the same time consciously takes the risk of a gradual alienation from "common sense" for the sake of critique and that as a result derives the necessity and the legitimacy of political "theory" or "philosophy" directly from the natural paradoxes and limits of politics itself.