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ARTICLES

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Wonder to Imagine Better – Thinking Politics in the Anthropocene

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Słowa kluczowe: antropocen; polityka; zadziwienie; wyobraźnia; sąd refleksyjny

Abstract

The paper considers the relevance of wonder and imagination to thinking about politics in the Anthropocene. In the first step, the Anthropocene is presented as a foundational political challenge. After that, the faculties of imagination and wonder are discussed, each in relation to the challenge(s) posed by the Anthropocene. In the final step, wonder is connected to imagination through an account of reflective judgment. The paper concludes by looping back to the Anthropocene and pointing to further questions to be considered. The argument draws on the work of Hannah Arendt, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, among others.

Introduction

The term "the Anthropocene" expresses the realization that we humans and our products now act as a force that destabilizes the Earth system at all levels, including the geological one (Steffen et al., 2007).[1] To claim this period calls for a new name is to suggest the scale of our impact on the planet is unprecedented, and therefore, its exact nature and consequences are difficult to imagine. One of the areas that need reimagining, I will argue, is the character and foundations of politics. In the first section, I specify in three points what I take to be the foundational political challenge of the Anthropocene. Next, I turn to Hannah Arendt to develop a twofold account of political imagination and use it to rearticulate the political crisis of the Anthropocene. In the succeeding section, I introduce the concept of wonder as a political faculty. I offer a threefold account of wonder and follow up by linking it to the three aspects of the political challenge of the Anthropocene. In the next step of the argument, I connect wonder to imagination through the concept of judgment. I conclude by looping back to the Anthropocene, as well as pointing to some additional questions that require consideration.

The political challenge of the Anthropocene

As a political problem, the Anthropocene demands attention at two levels, which roughly correspond to what Chantal Mouffe calls the dimensions of politics and the political, respectively. Politics, Mouffe says, comprises "the manifold practices of conventional politics" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 8), i.e., institutions, instruments, standards, etc. through which the functioning of a society is organized. To treat the Anthropocene as a political matter in this sense is to employ the measures offered by a given political system – from the media, through civic activism to the programs of political parties and, finally,

[1] In March 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) rejected the motion to recognize the Anthropocene as a current geological epoch (succeeding the Holocene). However, what the IUGS found controversial was not the claim that humans have a pervasive impact on the planet but rather some of the details of the Anthropocene proposal as it was submitted (e.g., its starting point). Moreover, the IUGS acknowledged that the term "the Anthropocene" will continue to be used in various disciplines and public discourse (IUGS, 2024).

law-making – to address environmental concerns. However, the aptitude (or the primary responsibility) of politics for addressing the Anthropocene is far from uncontroversial, with science, technology, or the market often being given priority over politics (cf. Latour, 2015). And if the very province of politics – the question of what belongs to its scope and therefore of what politics actually is – is at stake, then we enter the dimension of what Mouffe calls the political, zooming in on "the very way in which society is instituted" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9; this general definition is independent of Mouffe's specific agonistic account of the political, as Mouffe herself emphasizes). In other words, the Anthropocene not only generates a set of problems that should be addressed by political measures but also, and more basically, calls for reflecting on the very foundations of politics.

In treating the Anthropocene in this way, I follow such authors as John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering (2019), as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021), who point out that the Anthropocene brings about a crisis in (Western) ideas of politics, and call for a revision of these ideas. Using the categories I have discussed so far, the problem can be expressed in terms of the disconnection between the levels of politics and the political. For even if we do agree that the anthropogenic planetary crisis should be addressed by means offered by politics, the question that emerges is this: can the political realm be instituted at all? More specifically, I propose to break this challenge down into three overlapping points: the problem of agency, the difference between human and other-than-human beings, and the crisis of understanding.

First, let us assume the following working understanding of agency: agency is the spontaneous, responsible, and accountable activity over which the actor has some degree of control. In the Anthropocene, agency becomes problematic as we are confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, to say that human beings are bringing about a dramatic change in the functioning of the planet – a change that would not have happened without our activities and in this sense can be said to have been caused by us spontaneously, rather than following from the existing processes on Earth – is to suggest that we, humans, can act as potent agents. On the other hand, it is quite clear that an average human being does not have much of a sense of agency when confronted with the structural factors perpetuating ecologically unsound habits (cf., e.g., carbon lock-in). Moreover, albeit – one way or another – human-engendered, the crisis brings about violent natural processes

and rapid events (e.g. weather events), over which we have little (if any) control and which, therefore, make us feel powerless.[2]

One way to articulate this paradox is to use Chakrabarty's concepts of the global and the planetary. To think in terms of the global, Chakrabarty says, is to approach the environment from the angle of *global*ization. Here, the entire Earth is treated as the object of human agency, out there to be used for the benefit of humanity (or part of it). However, as Chakrabarty succinctly puts it, "the global reveals the planetary" (Chakrabarty, 2021, pp. 205–217): when we act extensively on our material surroundings, we activate universal (cosmic) processes that we neither created nor control. In other words, by causing the Anthropocene, we subvert our own agency. Perhaps, as such, the Anthropocene dramatizes what Hannah Arendt sees as the inherent ambivalence of action. When we act, Arendt argues, we initiate a completely new course of events and therefore exercise autonomy from what is given. But the unprecedented character of action means it continues into the future in ways we can neither predict nor fully control (Arendt, 1998, pp. 181–192). Interestingly enough, Arendt observes that this ambivalence of action achieves a new, dangerous quality when we begin to act into the more-than-human world and therefore "infect" it with instability (cf., e.g., Arendt, 1998, pp. 1–6; Arendt, 2006, pp. 57–63). Although Arendt formulates this conclusion in her comments on nuclear energy and space conquest, it can be easily applied to the condition of the Anthropocene (cf. Hyvönen, 2020). The question that emerges is this: are we still capable of taking responsibility for "instituting society" (Mouffe)? Or should we rather surrender to the forces we may have provoked but do not control?

This is related to the second of the points mentioned above, i.e., the status of the difference between human and other-than-human beings. On the one hand, the Anthropocene works against human hubris, prompting the recognition that we, humans, are just part of the broader realm of materiality.

[2] Another legitimate concern is the question of who is actually causing the crisis. Is it really all of humanity or only some parts of it? Yet more fundamentally, can the sources of the problem even be expressed in terms of agency, or are the systemic factors decisive? These questions animate the debates around the various alternatives to the concept of the Anthropocene. I leave them aside because, no matter how the problem of responsibility is settled, a robust idea of agency is needed if any positive change is to be made.

Can our ability to "institute a society" form part of – rather than be in opposition to – our materiality? Can such concepts as agency, freedom, responsibility, or accountability be reconciled with our materiality? On the other hand, the boundaries of political community are being challenged. If materiality becomes increasingly relevant to politics, then it is not only our materiality that matters, so to speak, but that of other beings as well. How can other-than-human entities participate in politics? How can a collectivity of human and other-than-human beings be built?

Finally, both of the difficulties discussed point to the crisis of understanding. On the one hand, our notions of agency (and with it, the concepts of freedom, responsibility, and accountability) and political community are unsettled. So too are the more basic metaphysical concepts that provide the background for political concepts. For example, we are confronted with a time scale – the so-called deep or geological time – that challenges the (Western) ways of experiencing temporality. Simultaneously, the expectation of relatively stable cause-and-effect relationships gives way to the experience of rapid events following the transgression of tipping points (Rockström, 2025). The concept of nature – if it is understood as a realm independent of human creations – is also being challenged as our activities mark (or better, perhaps, mar) each subsystem of the Earth. On the other hand, the crisis can be perceived as so pressing as to leave no room for reflection, urging quick action instead. In other words, when our thinking habits fail us, it often seems emergency rhetoric is the only solution.[3] How do we make sense of the Anthropocene and exercise our sense-making faculties in this time of crisis, then? How do we decide how to institute the political realm, given that many of our political and metaphysical concepts are being rendered obsolete?

Introducing political imagination

All of the above questions mean that, as I suggested at the beginning, the foundations of politics need reimagining. So far, I have appealed to an intuitive, common-sense idea of imagination. I now want to offer a more

[3] This kind of rhetoric is often criticized in decolonial and Indigenous philosophies (cf., e.g., Ferdinand, 2022; Whyte, 2021).

technical reading of the concept, thinking about imagination as *a faculty*. What I mean by a faculty – and this also applies to wonder and reflective judgment, which I discuss below – is the ability to respond to things in a certain way. Faculties thus include both an active and a passive element, and they contribute to how we experience that which appears to us. In this general sense, then, my understanding of faculties is phenomenological: faculties are responses to and, at the same time, ways of looking at, that which comes our way. Thus, by discussing imagination, wonder, and reflective judgment in the context of the political challenge of the Anthropocene, I want to show how these faculties can shape our experience of the planetary crisis. Remaining at this fundamental level, I do not take up here the more practical questions of how the three faculties can be cultivated and encoded in specific political institutions.

To start with, when thinking about imagination, I am inspired by the author introduced at the end of the previous section, that is, Hannah Arendt. Whereas Arendt did not develop a systematic account of imagination, she did discuss it in a number of places – often in connection with other concepts important to her inquiries, such as understanding and judgment – and, what is particularly important to me, she emphasized its political relevance. Here, I propose to single out two points from her remarks on imagination and then translate them into two features of politics. As I move on, I will show how these features can operate in thinking about politics in the Anthropocene, starting by rearticulating the challenges of the Anthropocene at the end of this section.

First, let us think through Arendt's definition, inspired by Immanuel Kant, of imagination as "the faculty of making present what is absent, the faculty of re-presentation" (Arendt, 1992, p. 79). Imagination goes beyond what is (or has been) given to one but is not completely unhinged from it. This is how I understand the concept of "*re*-presentation": imagination does not start from scratch but contains a reference to something that has been experienced (cf. also Arendt, 1972, pp. 5–8). I link this feature of imagination to the constructivist moment of politics – but I mean here a constructivism of a specific type. Namely, politics involves the ability to go beyond the immediate, to construe something "that is not there," without denying what we are experiencing (have experienced). Politics, then, is neither fully determined by facticity (what is given) nor completely disconnected from it. This is one of the vectors that can provide

a framework for thinking about politics in the Anthropocene. In this reading, politics involves the push and pull between conditioning factors and creativity, going beyond the simple opposition of determination and complete spontaneity.

Second, Arendt argues that imagination "enables us (…) to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance (…), to be generous enough to bridge the abysses of remoteness (…) [of] everything that is too far away from us" (Arendt, 1994, p. 323). "Making present" or "re-presenting" thus involves "the distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others" (Arendt, 1994, p. 323), that is, renegotiating distance and proximity, and therefore it includes a relational element. I propose to link this feature of imagination to the type of relating in which that which seems familiar becomes defamiliarized (it loses the appearance of obviousness) and that which feels strange is pulled towards oneself. This is the second vector that can form the framework for thinking about politics in the Anthropocene. Here, politics involves the effort of taking a step back from that which is immediate – such as our habits of thought but also what seems most pressing (e.g., the interest of some section of humanity) – and of reaching out to that which is different (e.g. other-than-human beings).

With the twofold account of imagination and the related political framework in mind, we can now reformulate the three points that make up the political challenge of the Anthropocene. First, regarding the paradox of agency, how can we experience agency beyond the dualism of determination and spontaneity? Second, regarding the human-other-than-human divide, how can we decenter our human perspective and "bridge the abysses" to other-than-human beings? Third, regarding the crisis of understanding, how can we make sense of the Anthropocene without either being under pressure from that which is given (the established ways of thinking, the urgency of the crisis) or getting completely lost in the process?

Introducing wonder

I do not propose to give a complete answer to the above questions in this paper. But I want to point to a possible direction for addressing them by introducing an account of wonder. The concept of wonder (*thaumadzein*, *admiratio*) and the activity of wonder*ing* have a long history in the Western

philosophical tradition, and have been the object of renewed attention in the past decades. Here, I draw selectively on these diverse resources to offer an account of *the faculty of wonder as a type of reflectiveness that enables non-appropriative relationships*. The concept of non-appropriation is central to my interpretation of wonder, and it filters my reading of other studies, thereby shaping my own conception of this faculty.[4]

Three overlapping features make up this account. First, wonder unsettles our habits of thought, rather than being determined by them. When Aristotle, in the classic passages from the first book of *Metaphysics*, observes that philosophy begins in wonder, which, in turn, stems from the sense of one's ignorance, he presents wonder as the power to transform a lack of knowledge into a search for it (Aristotle, n.d.). On the eve of modernity, Descartes follows the same thread, arguing that wonder incites "the desire to know more" about its object (Descartes, 2017, §71). But, in addition to that, he links wonder, "the first of passions," to the sense of novelty and surprise (Descartes, 2017, §53). Wonder thus acquires a *comparative* character: not only does it push us to fill in the gaps in our understanding, but it also makes us realize that our habits of thought do not work in a given situation, and that the case under consideration cannot be simply appropriated to what we already know. Similar assumptions play out in recent interpretations of wonder, which additionally emphasize its *active* character. Here, Martha Nussbaum's account of wonder as an emotion is quite representative. In what she calls her neo-Stoic approach, emotions are value judgments in which we state that something or somebody is important to our well-being (eudaimonia). Yet wonder, writes Nussbaum, is "non-eudaimonistic" in that it is not motivated by a prior idea of a flourishing life. Through wonder, rather than appropriating an object to what we already value, we respond to its pull and revise our goals accordingly (Nussbaum, 2008, pp. 54–55). Jeremy Bendik-Keymer creatively engages with Nussbaum's approach to offer his own concept of wonder as "the positive anxiety of considering things." For him, wonder is "the cast of mind," a form of reflectiveness, in which we engage when we are confused about how to make sense of something (Bendik-Keymer, 2023, pp. 12, 19). Wonder, then, kicks in when we realize that our patterns of understanding do not apply in a given situation and need revising.

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[4] I discuss wonder and non-appropriation elsewhere (Lisowska, 2024a, 2024b, 2025).

But to respond to something new, we need to be able to *perceive it as new*. Therefore, the second aspect of wonder I want to emphasize is the ability to see the apparently ordinary – as unordinary; as Anders Schinkel puts it, wonder "*defamiliarizes* the world" (Schinkel, 2021, p. 53; italics in the original, quotation modified). Indeed, we might intuitively associate wonder with children's propensity to ask questions about things that seem perfectly commonplace to adults. Yet if there is something childlike about wonder, there is nothing childish about it. Arendt traces the defamiliarizing potential of wonder back to Plato, who, she argues, wanted to conceptualize Socrates' tendency to fall into sudden states of speechlessness and motionlessness. For Plato, says Arendt, "*thaumadzein* [is] the wonder at that which is as it is" (Arendt, 1990, p. 97). Whereas for the Greeks wonder had an affirmative character and expressed admiration for everything "that is as it is" (Arendt, 1978b, pp. 150–151), in Arendt's own interpretation, wonder is no longer unequivocally celebratory. Quite importantly, this shift is linked to her intention to apply wonder to thinking about politics. When Arendt observes that "an authentic political philosophy (…) can spring only from an original act of *thaumadzein*" and must "directly grasp the realm of human affairs and human deeds," she emphasizes that to wonder politically is to be ready to feel disturbed (Arendt, 1994, pp. 445–446). Indeed, Kyle Barker (2019) and Magnus Ferguson (2022) argue in their respective works that Arendt makes room for wonder-as-horror (or terror). This is perhaps best manifested in Arendt's treatment of the 20th-century totalitarianisms. In refusing to see them as mere incarnations of "some well-known evil of the past, such as aggression, tyranny, conspiracy" (Arendt, 1994, p. 309), Arendt chose to wonder, with terror, that they were as they were. She thus rejected attempts to conceptually appropriate the atrocities of the century by means of familiar terms and decided to endure their extraordinariness (of the worst possible type).

The two features of wonder already discussed reveal that, thirdly, wonder is a response to difference as difference. Because it is not determined by preexisting habits of thought, wonder is sensitive to the singularity of its object, whether it is perceived as terrifying, attractive, or simply puzzling. As such, wonder translates non-appropriation into a manner of relating. Luce Irigaray points to this conclusion in her creative rereading of Descartes. Whereas she focuses on sexual difference,

her remarks can be generalized to the idea of wonder as enabling relationships based on responding to the specificity of another being:

> This first passion [i.e. wonder – Anon] is indispensable not only to life but also and still to the creation of an ethics. (…) Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us completely. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An *excess* resists (…). (Irigaray, 1993, p. 74; italics in the original).[5]

Wonder thus responds to the excess of another being's difference, an excess that cannot be appropriated as part of what feels like oneself, so to speak. Another way to put this would be to say, as Nussbaum (2008) and Bendik-Keymer (2023) do in their respective accounts, that wonder counteracts narcissism. Wonder overcomes the desire to subject others to my control – and in this way to make them part of myself – and helps me relate to them as different from myself.

Wonder in the Anthropocene

Let me now link my account of wonder to the three challenges of the Anthropocene. First, the unsettling character of wonder suggests that it can form part of the solution to the crisis of understanding brought about by the planetary crisis. When we wonder, we honestly respond to the novelty of the phenomenon in question. To wonder at the events of the Anthropocene, then, is to refuse to see them in the business-as-usual way, i.e., as instances of familiar processes that do not call for a revision of our thinking and acting. The defamiliarizing work of wonder also means that it can slow things down and create a space for reflection. When we wonder that something "is as it is," as Arendt would put it, we stop approaching this phenomenon in a commonsense way and try to make sense of what it can mean for it to be as it is. Wonder can thus work not only against the business-as-usual-style approach to the Anthropocene but also against the emergency rhetoric that all too easily substitutes for thinking. In wonder, disorientation causes neither the defensive reinforcement of familiar but obsolete ways of thinking nor panic but instead leads to the search for new senses. Finally, the Arendtian variety

[5] Cf. also La Caze (2013) for a discussion of Irigaray's concept of wonder.

of wonder-horror suggests that wonder does not always include a positive evaluation of that which evokes it. As such, wonder can arguably respond to that which is disquieting – even dreadful – about the Anthropocene. All in all, wonder provides an aid in "staying with the trouble"[6] of the Anthropocene,[7] and in honestly confronting that which is new and perplexing about this crisis.

Second, wonder's sensitivity to difference can be extended beyond the human realm and connected to the challenge of relating to other-than-human beings. It is remarkable that, apart from her theory of emotions, another context in which Nussbaum discusses wonder is justice for other-than-human animals. In *Frontiers of Justice* (2007) and the more recent *Justice for Animals* (2023), she argues, in the Aristotelian vein, that different animals strive for their own good in different ways, and the activity they display in the process is worthy of wonder. Bendik-Keymer goes even further when he talks about the biocentrism of wonder, meaning that wonder is specifically – though not exclusively – focused on life. For if wondering involves reflecting on how to make sense of something, then wonder is particularly elicited by the diverse ways in which different living beings – animal and non-animal – strive for a life that makes sense to them: not necessarily because they consciously appreciate it as such but because it is optimal for them (Bendik-Keymer, 2022). As a result, wonder helps establish non-appropriative relationships with other-than-human beings, in which they are appreciated in their plurality for their own sake rather than exploited for the benefit of (some) human beings. Wonder thus supports moving beyond the mentality of what Chakrabarty calls the global.

But is wonder relevant to the task of rethinking agency beyond the opposition of determination and full spontaneity? To begin addressing this question, I want to point to an interesting equivocation in Arendt's comments on wonder. The philosopher observes that, in Greek philosophy, the experience of *thaumadzein* was already known to the Presocratics, who marveled at *physis,* i.e., "nature (…), the totality of things that were not man-made and not created by a divine maker but came into being by themselves"

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[6] I have borrowed this expression from Donna Haraway (2016).

[7] Haraway believes that the concept of the Anthropocene does not "stay with the trouble" we are dealing with and proposes another name for our epoch, "Chthulucene," to emphasize the need to focus on relationships between species (Haraway, 2016). My approach is thus largely consistent with hers, even if I am using the category of the Anthropocene.

and were hidden behind the appearing phenomena (Arendt, 1978b, p. 143). Thus, it could be argued that the object of the Presocratic wonder was everything that exists, where "everything" is conceived in an immanent rather than a transcendent (suprasensual) way.

Interestingly, Arendt mentions the concept of *physis* in quite a different context as well. Since, in this other passage, she pairs it with the expression "that which is as it is," we can assume that here *physis* is also the object of wonder (although Arendt mentions gratitude). Defending her treatment of Adolf Eichmann's trial in a letter to Gershom Scholem, she writes:

> I found it puzzling that you should write "I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way." The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I have never even felt tempted in that direction. It would have been like saying that I was a man and not a woman – that is to say, kind of insane. (…) I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything *that is as it is* [italics added]; for what has been *given* and what was not, could not, be *made* [italics in the original]; for things that are *physei*, not *nomoi* (Arendt, 1978a, p. 246).

Whereas for the Presocratics *physis* meant the total order of becoming, here Arendt uses the category to talk about what is most intimate. Importantly, although the main focus of her exchange with Scholem is her Jewishness, another example of "that which is as it is" is her sex/gender, i.e., her body type. This connects to the non-transcendent sense of the Presocratic *physis*. Wonder at *physis* thus moves between two levels – "that which is as it is" as everything that exists and "that which is as it is" as what is most intimate to oneself, including one's body.

Wonder and imagination – points of convergence

This last point in fact combines two aspects I now want to start connecting to my working understanding of imagination. All in all, I see imagination as continuing but also presupposing wonder.

First, then, when I wonder at the "that which is as it is" of my position, I can start imagining what it could mean for me to become the agent I can be.

Here, my *physei* may appear as brute – i.e., as having a certain non-negotiability about them – but not as brutal – i.e., as oppressive and fully determining; I am imagining what I can do with what I have been given. But to perceive my circumstances in this way, I need to be able to "stay with their trouble," as wonder can help me do. In other words, I should see my *physei* in their particularity, *as given to me and not anybody else*. Only then will I be able to respond to the "that which is as it is" of my position creatively, rather than treating it as predetermined by some general idea (e.g., of what it means to be a woman, a Pole, or an academic…). Together, then, wonder and imagination allow me to move between spontaneity and determination.

Second, to wonder at the given is to wonder at that which has been given to me as the particular being I am and at that which has been given to me from outside of myself, as the two senses of *physis* may suggest. Thus, if I am ready to imagine what it could mean for me to become the agent I can be, I am also open to imagining what it means to be someone or something else. But to try to "bridge the abyss" to somebody else without trying to reduce what is specific to them to what is familiar to me, I need to be able to wonder at their difference as a difference. Here, then, wonder and imagination help create relationships I am calling non-appropriative. Through wonder and imagination, I reach out to others and gain enough distance from myself to acknowledge that their differences cannot be explained away so that those others appear much the same as me. I thus appreciate them as given to me in their particularity.

Wonder and imagination – reflective judgment

The political import of the "cooperation" of wonder and imagination becomes apparent in their intertwinement in the faculty of political judgment. Here, I want to draw on Arendt's philosophy again. I mentioned at the beginning that one of the contexts in which Arendt discusses imagination is that of judgment. With wonder, the situation seems a bit more problematic, as Arendt points to a tension between wonder's tendency to go beyond the comfort of fixed beliefs and judgment, which should culminate in the formulation of an opinion (Arendt, 1990, p. 99). Yet, in my reading, the connection between wonder and imagination means that the former is active in reflective judgment as well.

For her part, Arendt did not manage to systematize her remarks on judgment, as was the case with imagination. But when she did discuss this faculty, she drew a lot from Kant. Here, Arendt makes an original claim that Kant's conception of the judgment of taste – i.e., the judgment about the beautiful – in fact provides a blueprint for theorizing judgment as a political faculty. Two features of this account are important to me.

First, Arendt accepts Kant's classification of judgments of taste as reflective, rather than determinative. Reflectiveness means that a judgment does not subsume the phenomenon being considered under a prior, fully defined concept, but, instead, "ascend[s] from the particular (…) to the universal" (Kant, 1987, p. 19). In other words, in reflective judgment, we respond to the specificity of the case in question, rather than appropriating it to what we already know. Kant explained this peculiarity of reflective judgments by arguing that they are based on "a free play" of understanding – the power of thinking in terms of concepts – and imagination – the power of synthetizing sensory data into a phenomenon (Kant, 1987, §9, p. 62).

Arendt continues by linking imagination to the ability to see a phenomenon one is reflecting on as an example, "the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule" (Arendt, 1992, p. 84). Examples thus help us imagine new senses of a concept, or perhaps even new concepts. But to take in what is given, rather than determine its sense based on our habits of thought, we need to be able to perceive it in its specificity. Here, again, the defamiliarizing work of wonder is needed. Wonder opens up reflection (as Kant and Arendt understand it) to us and helps us attend to what we are dealing with instead of falling back on routine interpretations. The involvement of wonder and imagination thus means that when we make reflective judgments, we focus on the specific case at hand, while also proposing to see it as pointing beyond itself to something more general. In this way, our reflective judgments operate in the space between spontaneity and determination. In terms of what I am proposing, then, reflective judgments are political because they are constructivist in the sense laid out above.

Yet the question that emerges is how, given that they do not fall back on established ways of thinking, reflective judgments can be shared with others. The second feature of Arendtian judgment I want to mention addresses this difficulty. Kant argued that the communicability of reflective judgments is based on enlarged (or broadened) thinking (*eine erweiterte*

Denkungsart) (Kant, 1987, §40, pp. 160–161; italics in the original), which Arendt reformulates as "representative thinking," clearly evoking her idea of imagination as "re-presenting what is absent." And so, she argues that to formulate a reflective judgment is to "consider a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to [one's] mind the standpoints of those who are absent." This effort, she adds, is not "a question (…) of empathy, as though I tried to be or feel like somebody else (…), *but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not*" (Arendt, 2006, p. 237; italics added).

To think representatively, then, we need to activate our imagination and "bridge the abyss to others," while gaining distance from what is closest to us. "The only condition for this exertion of imagination," Arendt says, "is disinterestedness, the liberation from one's own private interests" (Arendt, 2006, p. 237). But this also shows that reflective judgment requires wonder as presented here. Through wonder, I become open to the difference of another person without trying to reduce it to what is similar to me and thereby appropriate it.[8] This means that wondering at others helps me acknowledge that there is nothing obvious about my own point of view – about how I am interested in the world – and allows me to gain distance from my "own private interests." In terms of my argument, then, reflective judgment is political because it establishes relationships across differences in which one's own perspective is decentered.

But this is not to say that, in reflective judgment, I am supposed to completely forget myself, so to speak. After all, "being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not" means that I can neither appropriate somebody else's point of view as my own nor allow them to appropriate my point of view as their own. Indeed, Arendt observes that

> by his [sic!] manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is, and this disclosure, which is involuntary, gains in validity to the degree that it has liberated itself from merely individual idiosyncrasies (Arendt, 2006, p. 220).

It seems, then, that only by getting out of my head, by transcending my idiosyncrasies in relating to others, do I manifest (come to be) who I am. And this

[8] Cf. Iris Marion Young (2001, pp. 220–225) on the role of wonder in what she called "asymmetrical reciprocity" of reflective judgment.

point begins to show not only the general political importance of reflective judgment but also its specific relevance to thinking about the political in the Anthropocene. I conclude by looping back to this critical political challenge.

Towards a conclusion – back to the Anthropocene

In reflective judgments, then, I express what is peculiar to me, at the same time as I acknowledge what is peculiar to others. My suggestion is that the relationships established in this way translate into an experience of agency that is likewise relational. Here, the agency of others – the fact that who they are and what they do cannot be reduced to who *I* am and what *I* do – is seen not as a threat to but as a supporting condition of my agency. Reflecting on the diversity of others brings me back to myself and helps me manifest myself as an agent. In this reading, then, to be an agent means to experience oneself as partly limited by others. I propose this as a starting point for rethinking agency in the Anthropocene.

Regarding the challenge of relating to other-than-human beings, it could be argued that the openness to difference characteristic of reflective judgment can be extended beyond the human realm. After all, a difference is a difference, and if we are ready to acknowledge the diversity among us, humans, we should do the same for other beings. Finally, reflective judgment is, essentially, a response to the crisis of understanding – or it may even make this crisis a permanent feature of understanding. The very concept of the Anthropocene, its many interpretations, and alternatives to it can be seen as products of reflective judgment as presented here.

However, these general remarks immediately provoke further questions. For example, even if we acknowledge the diversity of other-than-human beings, does that mean we can relate to them as *agents* (all of them? only some of them?)? Similarly, what role do other-than-human beings play in human reflective judgments? Can other-than-human beings *make* judgments, or can they only be *taken into account* in our judgments? Finally, the communicability of reflective judgments means that the novel senses they propose should be characterized by some degree of stability; if successful, a reflective judgment is accepted as offering an apt interpretation

of the phenomenon it addresses. What degree of stability can reflective judgments achieve in the radically unstable time of the Anthropocene, though? And how can they achieve it?

The argument I have presented in this paper thus intentionally points beyond itself towards further points that need addressing. However, one thing that hopefully follows from my considerations here is this: having presented the Anthropocene as a foundational political challenge and having shown how it can be experienced through the faculties of imagination, wonder, and reflective judgment, all centered on non-appropriative relating, I want to suggest that confronting the Anthropocene requires, first and foremost, thinking about and practicing adequate forms of relating. *Dealing with the Anthropocene is a relational matter*, and however we answer questions such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, we should focus on the arrangements that enable good (that is, I propose, non-appropriative) relationships across the plurality of beings, human and other-than-human.

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