

## SPEECHLESSNESS AND LINGUISTIC RECIPROCITY IN ARENDT

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THE IDEA that speech is the feature that sets humans apart from other living things is an old and frequently repeated one. It famously appears in Aristotle's *Politics*, in which Aristotle appeals to *logos* (notoriously translated as both 'reason' and 'speech') to explain why human beings are unique among the *zōa politika*. Many animals, Aristotle acknowledges, have a voice [*phone*] to express pleasure and pain. But only humans have the kind of rational speech that can "reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust."<sup>1</sup> What is distinctive about human beings is not that they are political animals (there are others); it is that the human is the political animal capable of rational speech by which the *polis* can come into being.<sup>2</sup> Speech makes this distinctively human life realizable.

Predicating the human political life on speech (or, in a different reading, correlating the two) begs a question: What does it mean to lack or lose the ability to speak? Put differently, what kind of human belonging is possible when one party cannot speak back? I pose this question with a specific context in mind. Sometimes, speaking persons come to lose the ability to speak over time due to illness. There are many aphasic, apraxic, and aphonic syndromes and associated illnesses that can impinge upon one's ability to speak and communicate linguistically. For my part, I am thinking about a family member's experience of illness (a Parkinsonian syndrome, we were told) that led at first

1 Aristotle, *Aristotle's Politics*, I.2, 1253a10–15.

2 The full implications of this claim are widely debated. Cheryl E. Abbate reads Aristotle to mean that it is both the capacity for speech and the capacity to "have perceptions about the good, bad, just and unjust" that make humans higher political beings, but she notes that the latter "stems from the capacity for speech" ("Higher' and 'Lower' Political Animals," 57). By contrast, Adriana Cavarero argues that for Aristotle, "the accent does not fall on the communicative function of speech as a privileged medium of public discussion" but rather falls on the fact that "logos as speech instead has the function of expressing signifieds that are inherent to the order of this community bond—a bond that is constructed in another way, through the natural process of association" (*For More than One Voice*, 187). On the topic of nonhuman political animals, see also Depew, "Humans and Other Political Animals in Aristotle's History of Animals."

to inhibited speech by way of secondary dysarthria—a neuromotor disorder associated with weakness of the muscles involved in speech—and eventually to the near total impairment of my father-in-law Ted’s capacity to communicate vocally, linguistically, and gesturally. Unlike many forms of primary progressive aphasia and its varied neuropathologic causes, Ted’s motor speech disorder left his ability to understand language fully intact. Over time, however, inhibited, slurred speech gave way to an absence of voice altogether, and eventually Ted’s illness meant that he could no longer reliably communicate linguistically through vocalizing, writing, typing, signaling, gesturing, or manipulating the sophisticated augmentative and alternative communication technology to which our family was privileged to have access. These symptoms contributed to what Minae Inahara calls a “speech intelligibility disorder,” in which [one] know[s] precisely what [one] wishes to say but at the same time [is] unable to say it.”<sup>3</sup>

When Ted began to struggle with linguistic communication, we sought out and received guidance about how to develop infrastructures of communication and expression that did not rely upon his voice or complex manipulations of his body. These included ways of asking questions to prompt assent or dissent, agreed upon signs for common or urgent needs, patterns and schedules of care, and heightened attentiveness to movements, sounds, and postures. We also learned to anticipate needs. For example, we kept a close eye on Ted’s dog Huckleberry, who had the well-intentioned but unhelpful habit of resting his head on Ted’s lap in an uncomfortable way. Some of these strategies partially succeeded, and some proved frustrating. For a time after Ted’s loss of reliable vocal and motor control, humor proved to be an enduring means of communication: wry laughs, chuckles from deep in the chest, and a particularly memorable (and dramatic) sigh when he was inadvertently brought a cup of decaf coffee.

Alongside nonlinguistic forms of connection and attunement, language remained, albeit asymmetrically, by which I mean that we spoke with and around Ted and only rarely received a response in kind. We would tell stories, listen to the news together, watch films, and fill the room with conversation in his presence. Ted’s wonderful home health aide Cindy narrated her movements and activities whenever she stepped out of his line of sight and maintained a steady stream of casual, friendly conversation as she helped him through his physical therapy exercises. I sometimes listened as my wife told Ted about her day over the phone, which was held to his ear in New York. These conversations were emotionally taxing for her but seemed vitally important in ways that we

3 Inahara, *The Rejected Voice*, 42.

could not fully articulate at the time. We all did our best not to fall into silence just because Ted could not respond in kind.

The intuition that I aim to develop in what follows is that unreciprocated speech can, in tandem with other person-centered modes of listening and sharing, affirm and maintain belonging in a shared world, even as it risks a great deal.<sup>4</sup> By ‘unreciprocated speech,’ I mean linguistic expression (not restricted to vocal expression) that does not elicit or intend to elicit communicative responses from a given recipient and that does not otherwise participate in a “give-and-take” of communicative exchange. Unreciprocated speech tends to lack many ethical and hermeneutical handrails (e.g., seeking input, correction, participation, consent) by which one might otherwise avoid imposition and harm. It risks what Frances Bottenberg, in her analysis of relationships of care with persons living with dementia, calls *epistemic arrogance*.<sup>5</sup> It can also feed into what Linda Alcoff describes as the “desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation.”<sup>6</sup> Keeping these substantial dangers in view, my proposal is that risking unreciprocated speech in contexts in which there is an asymmetry of communicative capacities between parties can be an act of care that grants nonspeaking persons purchase in the linguistic sphere(s) of meaning taking place around them.

I pursue this argument by engaging critically with Hannah Arendt’s writing on speech and political community. This is an admittedly unusual choice because Arendt is both an antagonist and an ally in the task of theorizing unreciprocated speech relations of care. On the one hand, few political or philosophical thinkers are as forceful as Arendt in her open insistence that speech, the medium “in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men,” is a prerequisite for a fully human life.<sup>7</sup> In numerous passages, Arendt appears to openly deem nonspeaking persons incapable of sharing in a world with others—they are, she writes, “literally dead to the world” (HC 176).

However, Arendt’s corpus also offers resources for conceiving of unreciprocated speech relations as capable of and fundamental to “sharing the world with others.”<sup>8</sup> Despite initial appearances that Arendt restricts world sharing to those capable of exchanging speech, I foreground the way in which Arendt

4 My focus in what follows is specifically on maintaining linguistic interconnection. This in no way disputes the importance or relevance of nonlinguistic forms of expression, meaning-making, communication, and reciprocity, some of which are raised in the final section.

5 Bottenberg, “Epistemic Arrogance, Moral Harm, and Dementia.”

6 Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 29.

7 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically as HC.

8 Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” 221.

predicates world sharing on shared objects of attention and practices of storytelling. Uncovering Arendt's subtle analysis of storytelling complicates her well-known valorization of speech and helps to motivate the idea that sharing in a linguistic world can be, as Stacy Clifford Simpican puts it, "undertaken *between* people with a range of capacities" and in forms other than communicative exchange.<sup>9</sup> Reading Arendt's account of storytelling alongside Aristotle's comments on storytelling in the *Politics*, I ultimately argue that unreciprocated speech can be wielded to extend a kind of linguistic hospitality that invites others to visit, inhabit, observe, and take solace in a shared world of language. Unreciprocated, caring speech of this kind can be both fraught and deeply meaningful in the context of caring for and living with persons who have undergone losses or impairments of speech.

In section 1 of the article, I briefly review several heterogenous senses of the term 'speechlessness' as it appears in philosophical and political scholarship in order to better establish the communicative context that motivates this project. Next, section 2 reconstructs several of Arendt's analyses of speech and speechlessness from her 1950s monographs and argues that her account of world sharing is *prima facie* exclusionary to nonspeaking persons. In section 3, I consider several possible objections to attributing a straightforward, exclusionary position to Arendt, and I argue that Arendt consistently upholds the premise that world sharing requires mutual linguistic expression. Section 4 unsettles this premise in two ways: first, by engaging with Iris Marion Young's concept of *asymmetrical reciprocity* and her recharacterization of communication as a "gift" rather than an exchange, and second, by foregrounding the indispensability of unreciprocated speech in Arendt's own account. Finally, in section 5, I conclude by identifying possible extensions of this argument to other ethical and communicative contexts involving asymmetrical expressive capacities and by giving concrete examples of how unreciprocated speech might contribute to the care of persons who do not have recourse to linguistic expression.

#### 1. FORMS OF SPEECHLESSNESS

The term 'speechlessness' and related (e.g., 'silence', 'muteness', 'voicelessness') carry distinct meanings and connotations across the staggering array of political, philosophical, theological, and medical discussions in which they appear. Though it is beyond the scope of this investigation to thoroughly taxonomize their various forms, relationships, purposes, and precipitators, it is worth emphasizing at the outset that political, philosophical, theological, and even

9 Simpican, *The Capacity Contract*, 102.

medical references to ‘speechlessness’ alike rarely take the term to imply the sheer absence of linguistic, vocal, and/or expressive faculties.<sup>10</sup> For example, a great deal of recent scholarship in political theory and philosophy identifies and analyzes forms of speechlessness that are imposed through violence, oppression, willful and interested ignorance, and the deprivation of standing and legal rights. In these discussions, constrained capacities to make oneself heard, intelligible, and recognized are commonly theorized as injurious silences.<sup>11</sup> Within “the dominant understanding of silence as the mark of political absence,” or what Mónica Brito Vieira calls “the voice model of politics,” ‘speech’ and ‘voice’ tend serve as metonymies for dignity, freedom, self-efficacy, and/or autonomy.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, ‘speechlessness’ and ‘silence’ tend to mark the absence of something indispensable to a person’s well-being and political agency. Justice, accordingly, demands the restoration, recognition, or amplification of voice; “where silence is forced, the proposed solution is to multiply sites for voice empowerment.”<sup>13</sup> Here, ‘speechlessness’ does not so much denote an absence of linguistic or vocal faculties as it does an “incommunicable silence” that emerges through dysfunctions at the level of social practices, social mistrust, and hostile, inattentive, stifling, or risky climates of reception, and/or through deliberately withheld speech and purposefully crafted expressive lacunae.<sup>14</sup> In short, many forms of political speechlessness can be described

- 10 For a remarkable survey of different forms of silence, see Michael Freeden’s “tentative mapping schemes” of silences in *Concealed Silences and Inaudible Voices in Political Thinking*, 35. Freeden’s “alternative, parallel, or intersecting” schemes “make no claim to comprehensiveness or inclusiveness” and instead are intended as “epistemological macro-vistas on silence” that offer “plausible axes of classification that stand in a complementary relation to one another” (35, 39, 35).
- 11 It is in this sense that, for example, Ayten Gündoğdu refers to “the speechlessness of migrants” who are refused political community (*Rightlessness in an Age of Rights*, 21). Similarly, bell hooks draws attention to the way in which Black feminists often find that their “voices [are] tuned out, dismissed, silenced” in white feminist spaces (*Feminist Theory*, 13).
- 12 Brito Vieira, “Representing Silence in Politics,” 976–77.
- 13 Brito Vieira, “Representing Silence in Politics,” 977. Brito Vieira proposes an alternative conceptualization of political silence that “take[s] silence as the site of a potential presence, rather than meaningless absence” and by which “speech and silence are not opposites” (987). See also her discussion of “commissive silence,” or the deliberate act of withholding speech, which is not germane to the central case of this article but crucial for theorizing silence in participatory democratic contexts in that “deliberate silences often enable agency and empowerment precisely *because* they protect subjects from assuming a legible position” (977–78).
- 14 Sul, “The Structure of Silence in Depression,” 4. See also Gündoğdu, who emphasizes that the political speechlessness of stateless persons “does not indicate the loss of the faculty of speech altogether; instead, it suggests that one’s speech is rendered meaningless or not taken into account” (*Rightlessness in an Age of Rights*, 21).

as “metaphorical” silences in the sense that “speech or noise is being produced but it is covering up something else or it is not understood in the right way.”<sup>15</sup>

Separately, philosophers and theologians sometimes appeal to speechlessness in the context of grappling with the indescribable, as Augustine did when he wondered whether “God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said . . . [a] contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable.”<sup>16</sup> A similar insufficiency of language might occur after experiences of shock, horror, trauma, awe, wonder, or sublimity, or what the Greeks called *arrheton*—the ineffable or unsayable. We fall speechless when words fail us, throwing us back on the dilemma of “how to speak of the unspeakable, how to express [that which] . . . exceeds our categories of understanding and our standards of judgment.”<sup>17</sup> There are myriad sources—mystical experiences, political crises, art, the sublime—that can place one in what Alice Crary calls “the traditional philosophical position of speechlessness” without incapacitating one’s linguistic capacities outright.<sup>18</sup> This is to say that one can be “speechless” with reference to valued communicative modes, networks, objects, or activities while retaining recourse to communicative faculties. The issue is often not so much whether one can speak, but when, where, how, to whom, and to what effect one can speak. This caveat has real stakes when the conflation of speechlessness with an incapacity to speak covers over unrecognized, inchoate, and unsanctioned forms of expression, as well as the possibility for “silence [to] constitute an essential mode for individuals to engage or disengage with and in public life.”<sup>19</sup>

Even restricting one’s scope to embodied incapacities for linguistic expression, it emerges that many forms of speechlessness do not entail the sheer

- 15 Degerman, “Silence, Depression, and Bodily Doubt,” 128. A notable exception is José Medina’s concept of “hermeneutical death,” which occurs when “one’s voice is *killed*” under “conditions of extreme epistemic oppressions in which one’s status as a subject of knowledge and understanding is barely recognized.” See Medina, “Varieties of Hermeneutical Injustice,” 47.
- 16 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 11.
- 17 Cavarero and Roncalli, “Narrative Against Destruction,” 8.
- 18 Crary, “A Question of Silence,” 387.
- 19 Degerman and Bellazzi, “Epistemic Arguments for a Democratic Right to Silence,” 1140. See also Brito Vieira’s claim that “making silence in public” and “suspending language” can “push back on current habits of thought and speech, expose their limitations and contradictions, and create an opening for their reconstitution” by “hold[ing] open a ‘space of appearance’ within which competing conceptions of political community can emerge and become the subject of public questioning.” See Brito Vieira, *Democracy and the Politics of Silence*, 115–16.

inability to express oneself vocally, linguistically, or otherwise. The physiological precipitators of speechlessness are extremely varied, from aphonia due to damage to the vocal cords to aphasia due to cognitive impairment or neurodegeneration. Many speaking persons have unreliable speech, which is not at all the same thing as unintelligible or absent speech, and some choose to express themselves nonverbally through sign language (e.g., American Sign Language or Indo-Pakistani Sign Language) or augmentative and alternative communication in the form of writing, gestures, symbols, or speech-augmenting and speech-generating technologies. As Katherine Dildy and Emily Largent argue, the tendency to think of capacity as a binary “should not obscure the fact that the components of capacity—understanding, appreciation, reasoning, and choice—are assessed along a continuum. Persons who lack capacity may nonetheless maintain one or more of these abilities to a meaningful extent.”<sup>20</sup> The term ‘speechless’ in these contexts is misleading if it is taken to mark a wholesale inability to communicate.

The point of this brief survey is not to now offer, by contrast, the central case of this article as some sort of extreme in which, *ex hypothesi*, no possibility of communication obtains. Although Ted’s speechlessness often produced “literal silence” in the sense of “a felt absence of speech or noise from or in something,” living with Ted involved attunement towards a range of inhibited linguistic expressions and nonlinguistic cues.<sup>21</sup> We briefly played correspondence chess over the computer, and for several years, Ted worked diligently and painstakingly to finish a book manuscript even while linguistic expression was not feasible for him in casual, everyday interactions.<sup>22</sup> My focus is not on the severity of Ted’s speechlessness. Instead, it is on those unreciprocated linguistic encounters that played a substantial role in sharing a world with him.<sup>23</sup> Though we lacked the means to engage in the give-and-take of conversation and had few assurances that our stories and chatter were appropriate or wanted, my view now is that unreciprocated speech maintained and affirmed a shared world between Ted and his family. In short, the idea that I hope to motivate through critical engagement with Arendt in the following sections is that risking speech in a situation like this might be an act of care.

20 Dildy and Largent, “Directing the End of Life in Dementia,” 80–81.

21 Degerman, “Silence, Depression, and Bodily Doubt,” 128.

22 See Burrows, *The Finest Building in America*.

23 This is not to say that these encounters were not “reciprocal” in a different sense of the term. In section 4 I draw from Young’s concept of *asymmetrical reciprocity* to distinguish between *reciprocated* speech and *reciprocal* speech, and I propose that the latter can obtain in the absence of the former.

## 2. THE WORLD OF SPEECH AND ACTION

Before turning to Arendt's explicit references to speechlessness, it is helpful to consider her concept (or concepts) of 'world' and, specifically, her account of the "web of human relationships" in *The Human Condition*:

The physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify. . . . But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the "web" of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality. (HC 182–83)

For Arendt, the "second, subjective in-between," which corresponds to her category of "action," occupies a different register of shared significance than the shared, physical "world of things," even if it is undeniably shaped and constrained by the latter (HC 183).<sup>24</sup> The web of human relationships opens a "space of appearance [that] comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action" (HC 199). This layer of "world" is an intersubjective achievement of speech and action that provides the conditions for the possibility for mutual appearance as human beings, or "whos" instead of "whats."<sup>25</sup> Going forward, by 'world' and 'world sharing,' I mean this enacted sphere of shared linguistic meaning and belonging.

The question is whether and in what way Arendt would characterize non-speaking persons as party to this "web of relationships." One reason that there is a question of *whether* is Arendt's open insistence that mutual appearance in the second in-between is predicated on the active exercise of speech. This view has its origins in Arendt's engagement with Aristotle. Consider again the

24 "Human existence is conditioned existence, [and] it would be impossible without things" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9). As Jared Highlen summarizes it, "The relations of human beings *with* each other are organized around the thing-world to which they are related in common" ("Hermeneutics of the *Polis*," 101).

25 This is far from a comprehensive reconstruction of what Arendt means by "world." As Sophie Loidolt notes, "In the literature, Arendt's notion of 'world' is often reduced to the public world and then directly identified with the political space of appearance," though she admits that this trend "has a certain basis in Arendt's writings" (*Phenomenology of Plurality*, 98). For a more robust exploration, see Loidolt's distinction between three inter-related concepts of world in Arendt's writing: the "appearing world," the "first in-between," and the "second in-between" (98–99). See also Highlen, "Hermeneutics of the *Polis*."

kind of speech that Aristotle has in mind as the precondition for a distinctively human way of life: one must “have” or possess [*ékhein*] reasoned speech [*logos*] and not merely share in or apprehend it as so-called “natural slaves” do.<sup>26</sup> As Josiah Ober observes, where the citizen wields *logos* actively and authoritatively, “women, slaves, and those who labor for others . . . are subsequently removed by Aristotle from the category of ‘complete’ political animals—i.e., fit to be active citizens who would expect to employ reason and speech, in accord with virtue, in deliberations concerning the common interest.”<sup>27</sup> On this picture, only the authoritative deployment of reasoned speech—not mere comprehension—grants entry into “full” political life.

Few twentieth-century political thinkers uphold Aristotle’s valorization of speech to the extent that Arendt does. This is nowhere more explicit than in *The Human Condition*, in which Arendt approvingly reconstructs the pre-Socratic view that “action and speech . . . belonged together and are the highest of all” (HC 25). She finds evidence for the interconnection of speech and action in Phoinix’s speech imploring Achilles not to sail home in the *Iliad*: “[You were] a mere child, who *knew nothing yet of the joining of battle / nor of debate where young men are made pre-eminent*. Therefore / [Agamemnon] sent me along with you to teach you of all these matters, to make you *a speaker of words and one who accomplished in action*.”<sup>28</sup> The repeated conjunction of speech and action in Homer (and Sophocles) suggests to Arendt that in the pre-Socratic imaginary, the two were “coeval and coequal” (HC 26). But by Aristotle’s time, Arendt argues, “to be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” (HC 26). Those excluded from this “most talkative of bodies politic” were *aneu logou*—without speech, speechless—in the sense that they did not share in “a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other” (HC 27).

Arendt takes pains to emphasize that to be *aneu logou* was a political status, not a matter of incapacity: the speechless barbarians were “deprived, of course,

26 The infamous line reads, “For he is a slave by nature who is capable of belonging to another—which is also why he belongs to another—and who participates in reason [*logos*] only to the extent of perceiving it, but does not have it” (Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politics*, I.5, 1254b20–25). Jacques Rancière suggests that “when [Aristotle] goes on to say that slaves understand language but do not possess it, one has the idea of a hierarchy, an allocation of human beings that is always based on a distinction between faculties of perception, faculties of the sensual and faculties of the intellect” (Rancière and Engelmann, *Politics and Aesthetics*, 66).

27 Ober, “Political Animals Revisited,” 209.

28 Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 209–10 [ix.437–43] (emphasis added).

not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life" (HC 27). But in chapter 5, devoted to "the revelatory quality of speech and action" (HC 180), Arendt appears to assert that speech is, in fact, an essential human faculty:

Through [speech and action], men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, *not indeed as physical objects, but qua men*. This appearance, as distinguished from *mere bodily existence*, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative *from which no human being can refrain and still be human*. (HC 176, emphasis added)

A life without speech and without action . . . and this is the only way of life that in earnest has renounced all appearance . . . *is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men*. (HC 176, emphasis added)

One might wonder whether the 'and' of "speech and action" is really an inclusive 'or' such that speechless action is still sufficient for membership in the polity. But Arendt explicitly rules out this reading a few pages later:

Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, *it would lose its subject*. . . . Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deed, is possible *only if he is at the same time the speaker of words*. . . . His deed . . . becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do. (HC 178–79)

These passages appear to commit Arendt to a harsh position: to be *aneu logou* is to be other than human, other than subject, and other than actor. The speechless person in *The Human Condition* is a "what" instead of a "who" and fails to "make [an] appearance in the human world" as anything other than a physical body (HC 179). Just as Arendt famously describes entry into the world of speech and action as a "second birth" (HC 176–77), her comments indicate the inverse view that the loss of speech brings about a "first death" by which one loses one's place in the shared web of relations and becomes relegated to a merely biological existence. On this basis, it is already difficult to see how Arendt could accommodate nonspeaking persons as world sharers.

Something akin to this position is also discernible in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which Arendt describes the predicament of stateless, rightless persons as "manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the

world.”<sup>29</sup> Importantly, worldlessness cooccurs with speechlessness: the loss of place “entails the loss of the relevance of speech . . . and the loss of all human relationship . . . the loss, in other words, of some of the most essential characteristics of human life” (OT 297). Stateless persons become *aneu logou* when they are expelled from the world of speech and action and reduced to “the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human” (OT 297). Though this expulsion does not prevent stateless persons from communicating “in the sphere of private life” (OT 297), it precludes their belonging in a wider, human world: “Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals” (OT 301). Where the conditions for speaking and acting in concert are absent, neither is there a common human world. Stateless persons are, on this analysis, thrown back into a “peculiar state of nature” and have “lost all those parts of the world and all those aspects of human existence which are the result of our common labor. . . . They live and die without leaving any trace, without having contributed anything to a common world” (OT 300). These comments dovetail neatly with Arendt’s analysis of speech as the medium of human appearance *par excellence* in *The Human Condition*.

It goes without saying that Arendt is not specifically concerned with dysarthria due to illness. But even granting that she uses the term ‘speechless’ to describe a political status, not an embodied incapacity, it is hardly unreasonable to ask what her dire warnings about the loss of speech *qua* ejection from the world imply about persons who lose the ability to speak due to illness. As Judith Butler poses the question, applying pressure to Arendt, “Are we to say that those who are excluded [from the sphere of appearance] are simply unreal, disappeared, or that they have no being at all—shall they be cast off, theoretically, as the socially dead and the merely spectral?”<sup>30</sup> Given the evidence so far, it is natural to ascribe to Arendt something like the following view: to lose the capacity for speech, whether through political exclusion or dysarthria due to illness, is to lose the human medium of coappearance and therefore to “los[e] the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat [a person] as a fellow-man” (OT 300).

Would Arendt accept this extrapolation? Before troubling a straightforward attribution of this view to her, let me underscore the charge. To say that “a life without speech . . . is literally dead to the world [and] has ceased to be a human

29 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 296. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically as OT.

30 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 78.

life” is, at best, a callous and reckless thing to say in a world in which many human beings do not communicate verbally or linguistically, and Arendt’s consistent and unabashed assertions that the loss of speech is a loss of humanity tempt abhorrent conclusions about the personhood of someone like Ted towards the end of his life (HC 176). To be clear, I hope to show in what follows that Arendt does not entirely foreclose the possibility of world sharing between speaking and non-speaking persons, but it cannot be denied that she states that speechless persons are inhuman without clear caveats. This shortcoming of Arendt’s treatment of speechlessness diminishes (without extinguishing) the potential for her thought to contribute to a politics of belonging that extends to nonspeaking persons.

### 3. OBJECTIONS AND THE PREMISE OF RECIPROCITY

Without walking back the criticism of Arendt laid out above, it is worth pausing to reconsider whether the passages above paint a fair picture. Here are three possible objections to a strong, exclusionary reading. First, many of Arendt’s comments on speech and speechlessness in *The Human Condition* are reconstructions of “the ancient estimation of politics” (HC 207). Taking these glosses as representative of Arendt’s own thinking, it could be argued, misses the larger, historical argument that develops over the course of *The Human Condition*, in which she charts the evolution of the character of action since antiquity (and hence the changing status of the public realm as it comes to be displaced by the social realm). Perhaps we are too quick to interpret Arendt’s pastiche of Greek politics as indications of a nostalgia for the *polis*, as if, in Margaret Canovan’s words, “she intended to present . . . a kind of New Athens.”<sup>31</sup>

This objection may hold for portions of chapter 2 of *The Human Condition*, but it is in chapter 5 that Arendt offers her most pointed claims about speech and humanity, and this discussion is hardly historical. Consider also the following passage from the prologue, well before any talk of Athens: “Speech is what makes man a political being. . . . Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves” (HC 4, emphasis added). Even granting the objection, it is hard to deny that Arendt, in her own voice, endorses the necessity of speech for “meaningful” world sharing, leaving the reader with a “characterization of speech as the marker of human life.”<sup>32</sup>

A second and more substantive objection is that Arendt’s treatment of speechlessness in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is largely descriptive, not

31 Canovan, “Introduction,” viii.

32 Simplican, *The Capacity Contract*, 100.

normative. Though we might wish that it were otherwise, she could be taken to say that the other side of the coin of the indispensability of speech to the polity is that *in practice*, speechless persons suffer “the loss of a polity itself [that] expels [them] from humanity” (OT 297). Arendt’s remarks drive home what she takes to be “an ironical, bitter, and belated confirmation” of Edmund Burke’s skepticism about rights grounded in natural law (OT 299):

If a human being loses his political status, he should, according to the implications of the inborn and inalienable rights of man, come under exactly the situation for which the declarations of such general rights provided. *Actually* the opposite is the case. *It seems* that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man. (OT 300, emphasis added)

It is perhaps understandable that Arendt, in seeking to raise awareness of “the great danger arising from the existence of people forced to live outside the common world,” depicts the foreclosure of speech as a dire, even mortal injury (OT 302). A defender of Arendt, then, might read her comments on the inhumanity of those who are *aneu logou* as a condemnation of the material and political conditions by which those persons are *rendered* inhuman and a call to reinstate them in the human world. Ayten Gündoğdu provides one such redeeming perspective: “What emerges out of this reading is a different picture of Arendt—not an elitist celebrating the public glories of the privileged few who are entitled to engage in action but a critical theorist bringing to light the predicament of those who are deprived the possibility of acting, and especially speaking, in public.”<sup>33</sup>

Further support for this nonexclusionary reading can be found in Arendt’s criticism of the classical philosophical search for a stable human “nature or essence . . . [that] only a god could know and define” (HC 10). The activities and capacities discussed in *The Human Condition*, Arendt insists, “[do] not constitute anything like human nature” and are certainly not “essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human” (HC 10). Arendt is uninterested in, even openly hostile to, the project of establishing philosophical measures for admitting or excluding humans from the *polis* on the basis of their capacities. In this sense, her appropriation of Aristotle’s *zoon logon echon* stands at a distance from his project of defining the “citizen in an unqualified sense.”<sup>34</sup>

33 Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights*, 129.

34 Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politics*, III.1, 1275a20. See David J. Riesbeck’s discussion of “the suspicion that Aristotle’s theory of justice tends toward exclusion of many individuals from full citizenship, and hence from full participation in political community” (*Aristotle on Political Community*, 7).

Still, the fact that Arendt's comments on the inhumanity of political speechlessness are not intended to gatekeep the *polis* does not fully address the concern that Arendt denies the possibility of world belonging to nonspeaking persons. As Simplican puts it, it is true that "Arendt's emphasis on action can potentially move us away from measuring individual cognitive capacity as the marker of political membership"—nevertheless, "her emphasis on speech is troublesome."<sup>35</sup> The concern here is not only that Arendt oversteps herself rhetorically and tempts a politics of exclusion when she states that "a life without speech . . . has ceased to be a human life" (HC 176). The deeper issue is that Arendt's high valuation of speech makes it difficult to imagine how nonspeaking persons could ever possibly act, appear, or share a world when world sharing is, on her own account, a linguistic, expressive achievement. As Brito Vieira puts it, "there is little room for silence in Arendt's theory. She defined action as speech-action, and speech-action as the political itself. This left silence as either a dangerous outside . . . or as insignificant."<sup>36</sup> Despite Arendt's insistence that readers should not take speech to be an essential human capacity, her writing offers no alternative routes by which one can appear before others:

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness [of human beings] . . . With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world. . . . Obviously the affinity between speech and revelation is much closer than that between action and revelation. . . . [Action] becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do. (HC 176–79)

Passages like this one lend support to Butler's claim that for Arendt, "only public speech really counted as action."<sup>37</sup>

Reading Arendt's comments on speech as descriptive and nonessentialist does not fully address the charge that her peerless valuation of speech is exclusionary. To paraphrase Butler, Arendt risks ratifying the very regime of appearance that she problematizes.<sup>38</sup> Even if there are good reasons to rhetorically inflate the degree to which exercising speech is a powerful form of world sharing, there is all the more reason to acknowledge what that inflation implies about speechlessness associated with illness—namely, the implication that persons with illnesses that impair speech cannot but live outside of the human world proper.

35 Simplican, *The Capacity Contract*, 102.

36 Brito Vieira, *Democracy and the Politics of Silence*, 119–20.

37 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 155.

38 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 78.

A third objection against the foregoing is that Arendt does not always use 'speech' in a way that is interchangeable with linguistic communication in general, and so we risk misinterpreting her if we overlook the range of uses to which she puts these terms. It is true that Arendt is a moving target in this regard. In *The Human Condition*, she explicitly disambiguates the role of speech *qua* action from speech that is "a means of communication and information" that "could be replaced by a sign language" (HC 179). Elsewhere, she reiterates that some speech is "mere talk . . . [with] no acting capacity" and asserts that speaking persons are "deprived of the faculty of speech" if they rely on clichés or are otherwise "incapable of articulating thoughts and adequately expressing their feelings."<sup>39</sup> In "Religion in Politics," in which violence is characterized as "mute by definition" because it is "neither mediated nor operated through words," Arendt distinguishes between speech and "mere talk . . . [with] no acting capacity" that occurs outside "the realm of speech," further suggesting that not all uses of language amount to speech.<sup>40</sup>

Consider the range of uses to which Arendt puts the term 'speech' in *The Life of the Mind* alone: "significant sound," "reasoned argument," "the interconnection of language and thought," "that soundless speech—*tacite secum rationare*, to 'reason silently with oneself,'" "actual" and "audibl[e]" speech, "the sheer naming of things," the "sound[ing] out," "becom[ing] manifest," and "activat[ion]" of thought, Plato's "living speech, the original" from which writing derives, "everyday speech," and Heidegger's "speech [as] the original dimension in which the human being is able to respond to Being's claim."<sup>41</sup> Note also that in "Understanding and Politics," Arendt uses 'speech' as synonymous with 'vocabulary', and in "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," she implies that writing is a form of speech that survives death.<sup>42</sup>

It is not obvious that Arendt has something singular or stable in mind by the term 'speech', and these varied usages problematize a simple equivalence between 'speech' and linguistic communication writ large (though she does sometimes use the term in exactly that way: "communication, i.e., speech").<sup>43</sup>

39 Arendt, "Religion and Politics," 376; "Understanding and Politics," 308; and "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule," 253.

40 Arendt, "Religion and Politics," 376–77.

41 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 99, 144, 100, 99–100, 118, 100, 121, 116, 78, 170, 176, 180–81.

42 Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 322, and "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," 399.

43 Arendt, "Appendix," 268. To make matters more confusing, the term 'speechless' sometimes carries positive resonances for Arendt, such as in her observation that "the speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become is in many ways related to the speechless wonder of gratitude from which the questions of philosophy spring" ("Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought," 445).

To extract ourselves from the exegetical problem of what ‘speech’ means where, we can pose a more straightforward question: Would Arendt understand the absence or severe constraint of linguistic expression due to illness as a form of speechlessness? Even if linguistic expression is not a sufficient condition for *speech*, its absence might be sufficient for *speechlessness*.

The most obvious answer is yes. Arendt’s consistent position across multiple texts is that a shared world must be held between speakers. This is clear, for example, in *The Life of the Mind*, in which Arendt characterizes the “gift of speech” as being accompanied by the gifts of “reasoned argument *and reasonable response*” and claims that “speech is meant to be heard and words are meant to be understood by *others who also have the ability to speak*.”<sup>44</sup> In “Concern with Politics,” Arendt defines the *zoon logon echon* as “he [who] has the faculty of speech, the power to understand, *to make himself understood, and to persuade*.”<sup>45</sup> In “Introduction into Politics,” inhabitants of the public realm are “equals among equals” who are “capable of seeing and hearing and admiring *one another’s deeds*.”<sup>46</sup> The consistent picture is, like that of Aristotle’s *Politics*, that “having” speech means being capable of actively exercising speech, and sharing a world with others means actively and jointly participating in linguistic exchange.

Arendt is hardly alone in valuing reciprocity, which is a central concept for a wide array of communicative ethical frameworks.<sup>47</sup> What leads Arendt into trouble is not her high valuation of reciprocity but instead the apparent premise that reciprocity and world sharing can be achieved only by exchanging speech. This may make good sense in dialogical contexts, but it also implies that persons unable to reciprocate in language cannot partake in the linguistic web of human relationships even if their speechlessness (like Ted’s) is not accompanied by the absence or impairment of linguistic comprehension. In what remains, I aim to argue against this premise. Despite casting Arendt as the villain thus far, I hope to show that at times, she endorses the possibility for unreciprocated linguistic offerings to create shared worlds of language and meaning.

44 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 147, 32 (emphasis added).

45 Arendt, “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought,” 442 (emphasis added).

46 Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” 117, 123 (emphasis added).

47 For a paradigmatic example, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, according to whom genuine interpretive encounters should strive to be collaborative processes of meaning-making that adhere to the reciprocal “logic of question and answer” (*Truth and Method*, 378). For Gadamer, partners in dialogue trade questions and answers in order to co-constitute “a kind of artistic creation in the reciprocation of communication” (194). For more recent influential accounts of communicative reciprocity, see Hornsby, “Illocution and Its Significance”; and Fricker, “Epistemic Contribution as a Central Human Capability.”

## 4. SPEAKING FOR OTHERS

Iris Marion Young's concept of *asymmetrical reciprocity* from her essay "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought" is helpful for unearthing a more subtle treatment of unreciprocated speech relations from Arendt's writing. Like many other philosophers and political theorists, Young affirms reciprocity as a guiding principle of communicative ethics—but with notable modifications. Her argument begins with a critique of Seyla Benhabib's claim that the "development of [the] capacity for reversing perspectives and the development of the capacity to assume the moral point of view are intimately linked."<sup>48</sup> For Benhabib, learning to "take the standpoint of the other" and to "think from the perspective of others" is "essential to being a good partner in a moral conversation."<sup>49</sup> As Young summarizes it, Benhabib's position is that "respect for the situation and point of view of others requires being able to reverse positions with each of them" by assuming a "stance of symmetrical reciprocity."<sup>50</sup>

Though Young is broadly in agreement with Benhabib's emphasis on the "standpoint of the concrete other," she argues that imaginatively reversing perspectives with others is neither possible nor desirable (341). On the contrary, attempting to step into another's shoes by imaginatively inhabiting their perspective is, for Young, a dangerous approach to moral respect that "obscures the difference and particularity of the other position," is "ontologically impossible," and has "political undesirable consequences" (346). Accordingly, Young proposes an alternative principle, *asymmetrical reciprocity*, which she thinks better preserves differences between persons seeking to communicate.

On first glance, Young's account appears to preserve the premise of reciprocity rehearsed above: "Moral respect does indeed entail *reciprocity*" (351). The reciprocity Young has in mind, however, begins by acknowledging irreducible asymmetries between communicative partners:

This reciprocity of equal respect and acknowledgment of one another . . . entails an acknowledgment of an *asymmetry* between subjects. While there may be many similarities and points of contact between them, each position and perspective transcends the others, goes beyond their

48 Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 52.

49 Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 137, 52.

50 Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity," 342. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically. It is worth noting that Young's disagreement with Benhabib emerges from their diverging interpretations of Arendt's own concept of "enlarged thought." Against readers of Arendt who take enlarged thought to be a "process where the person judging imagines what the world looks like from other perspectives," Young reads Arendt to presume "relations of asymmetry and irreversibility" even while "taking the perspective of others into account" (358, 360).

possibility to share or imagine. . . . Each brings to the relationships a history and structured positioning that makes them different from one another, with their own shape, trajectory, and configuration of forces. (351)

For present purposes, what is especially instructive in Young's account is her claim that subjects are asymmetrical not only for reasons related to the uniqueness of their identities, histories, and social positions but also because communicative reciprocity is *temporally* asymmetrical. "The ethical relation is also asymmetrical," she writes, "in the sense that opening up to the other person is always a *gift*; the trust to communicate cannot await the other person's promise to reciprocate, or the conversation will never begin" (351). For Young, communicative encounters are best understood not as exchanges but instead as "relation[s] of giftgiving" that involve "temporal interval[s] [that] mak[e] each act of giving . . . an opening rather than the closing of a deal" (355–56). On this point, she cites Jacques Derrida: "For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift or debt. If the other *gives me back* or *owes me* or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift" (355). Whatever reciprocity obtains in Young's account, the demand or expectation of a reciprocated return is not a part of it.

Redescribing communicative encounters as noncontinuous, unidirectional gifts instead of expressive exchanges opens new possibilities for expanding Arendt's linguistic web of relationships so that it can be shared between speaking and nonspeaking persons. If it is "illocutionary gestures of offering and accepting meanings" that "create and sustain the social bond" (356), as Young argues, then the question becomes whether such bonds can be woven and maintained through unidirectional, unreciprocated offerings alone. If Young's "account of everyday giftgiving resonates for a theory of communicative action" (356), can we not imagine the achievement of "world" in the absence of reciprocated linguistic expression? Young's emphasis on temporal asymmetry yields a version of *reciprocal* speech that is responsive and attuned towards the listener but not *reciprocated* in the sense of being part of an exchange.

We can now restate our guiding question anew: What kind of world can be shared through reciprocal (in Young's sense) but asymmetrical and unreciprocated gifts or offerings of language, and what is its relationship to the world that is the "creative product of the dialogue among our multiple perspectives" (359)? We have seen that Arendt is principally interested in the "in-between" of speakers and actors that "owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly *to one another*" (HC 183). However, in numerous places, Arendt leaves open the possibility of a different kind of asymmetrical, linguistic, and

disclosive “in-between.” As noted in section 3 above, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt pointedly downplays the importance of a “common nature” to those who share a common world, instead arguing that shared reality is guaranteed “by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object” (HC 57–58). Where there is no shared object, “no common nature of men . . . can prevent the destruction of the common world” (HC 58).

Importantly, the objects of concern that constitute this in-between are not always the result of reciprocated speech. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt marvels at “the power of the spectator” to bestow “potential immortality” to the actors of great deeds.<sup>51</sup> This power is on display, she thinks, in Homer’s depiction of Odysseus weeping in the Phaeacian court. After being “entertained by the bard, who sings some story of Odysseus’ own life, his quarrel with Achilles: Odysseus, listening, covers his face and weeps, though he has never wept before, and certainly not when what he is now hearing actually happened.”<sup>52</sup> Note that Odysseus does not speak. His interaction with the bard is linguistic—he is moved by the bard’s words—but not dialogical. Arendt explores this very same Homeric scene in “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern”:

The scene where Ulysses listens to the story of his own life is paradigmatic for both history and poetry; the “reconciliation with reality,” the catharsis . . . came about through the tears of remembrance. The deepest human motive for history and poetry appears here in unparalleled purity: since *listener, actor, and sufferer are the same person*, all motives of sheer curiosity and lust for new information . . . are naturally absent in Ulysses himself, who would have been bored rather than moved if history were only news and poetry only entertainment.<sup>53</sup>

If the banquet scene is remarkable because Odysseus is at once listener, actor, and sufferer—that is, if the coincidence of these roles is unusual—then what is the “normal” state of affairs? We know from *The Human Condition* that the doer is “always and at the same time a sufferer” and that “to do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin” (HC 190). This indicates that what is remarkable about the Phaeacian banquet is not that Odysseus is both actor and sufferer but that he is both actor and *listener*, whereas normally these would be discrete roles. The bard’s song allows Odysseus to access his own story as a spectator and to participate in and bear witness to the reception and propagation of that

51 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 131.

52 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 132.

53 Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 45 (emphasis added).

story into a larger community of listeners. Only the Phaeacian bard speaks (or sings), while the gathered attendees of the banquet listen—and yet, in Walter Benjamin’s words, “a man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship.”<sup>54</sup> The companionship between the listeners and storyteller at the banquet is constituted by asymmetrical, unreciprocated speech relations. The storyteller sings those assembled into a world of shared meaning by opening a temporal interval in which his story becomes an object of mutual concern.

We can push this point further by insisting that storytelling is far from a niche practice in Arendt’s account of world sharing. On the contrary, she maintains that it is only in narrative that “a uniquely distinct ‘who’ . . . become tangible *ex post facto* through action and speech. *Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero” (HC 186). Arendt’s “world” is not coconstituted by members who all shout their own stories simultaneously in a cacophony of overlapping expressions. The temporal interval opened by stories is the condition of their durability. This is why she maintains in “The Concept of History” that action depends on speech and the power of the spectator to “save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion.”<sup>55</sup> A similar claim about the indispensability of narrative is evident in *The Human Condition*:

The specific revelatory quality of action and speech . . . can be represented and “reified” only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*. . . . Only the actors and speakers who re-enact the story’s plot can convey the full meaning, not so much of the story itself, but of the “heroes” who reveal themselves in it. . . . The intangible identities of the agents in the story . . . can be conveyed only through an imitation of their acting. (HC 187–88)

My suggestion is that Arendt’s emphasis on the revelatory power of storytelling, which Paul Ricoeur describes as both “very subtle” and also “one of the most striking themes of the whole treatise on *The Human Condition*,” is key to seeing how she might accommodate nonspeaking persons in worlds of speech and action.<sup>56</sup> For Arendt, stories provide shared linguistic objects of concern that represent and reify interconnections between storytellers and listeners. Sharing a story does not require a response; nor does it require that all parties have equal capacities for linguistic expression. Storytelling thus provides one

54 Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 372.

55 Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 41.

56 Ricoeur, “Action, Story and History,” 67.

answer to the question of how a linguistic world can be shared through nonreciprocated speech between speaking and nonspeaking persons.

Admittedly, there are many forms of coercive, unreciprocated speech that involve reference to shared linguistic objects of concern—e.g., to command or rule over, to reprimand, to monologue, to gaslight. (These would be, on Young’s view, both unreciprocated *and* nonreciprocal.) By contrast, the form of unreciprocated speech that I am after is one that invites, not browbeats, a listener to share in a world. I venture that the distinguishing feature of caring, unreciprocated speech is that it is spoken for the sake of the listener’s flourishing and inclusion. Something of this teleological orientation can be found in Aristotle’s own comments on storytelling in the *Politics*. In Book VII, after due consideration of the proper nourishment and physical conditioning of young children, Aristotle considers how storytelling might help or hinder in a child’s upbringing:

Concerning the quality of the stories and tales those of this age [younger than five years] should hear, let this be a matter of concern to the officials who are called managers of children. For all such things should prepare the road for their later pursuits. Hence most sorts of play should be imitations of the things they give serious attention to later.<sup>57</sup>

The appropriate stories for children, Aristotle thinks, are those that contribute to their eventual flourishing. For this reason, he proposes that “the legislator should banish foul speech [*aischrologia*] . . . particularly from among the young, so that they neither say nor hear anything of this sort” (VII.17, 1336b4–7).

Aristotle would certainly deny that children have the capacity to deploy *logos* authoritatively: with regard to the “deliberative element” of the soul, “the child has it but it is incomplete” (I.13, 1260a13). Children are *aneu logou*, but they share in the world of the *polis* as “onlookers of the sorts of learning that they themselves will be required to learn” (VII.17, 1336b36–37). Athenian children are thus conscientiously included in the world of speech and action in the position of *akroaton*, listeners or auditors, without the expectation that they will contribute to its coconstitution—at least, perhaps, “until they have reached the age at which they will be able to participate in reclining at table and drinking” and when “education [has made] them immune to the harm” of lampoons and comedies (VII.17, 1336b20–22). When calibrated for the sake of another’s flourishing, unreciprocated speech can offer listeners footholds in the linguistic sphere of meaning that surrounds them.

57 Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politics*, VII.17, 1336a29–33. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have argued for the possibility of world sharing through unreciprocated speech and against the notion that being able to express oneself to others in language is a necessary condition for sharing in a linguistic world. Unreciprocated storytelling, in contrast to other forms of linguistic solicitation that carry “an anticipatory element” and “see[k] to be ‘fulfilled’ or ‘taken up’ by another individual,” can be offered in a way that does not imply the need for a response on the part of the listener.<sup>58</sup> This does not entail any objection against the importance of safeguarding rights, infrastructures, and opportunities for speech in other political and ethical contexts. It can seem hard to overstate what Miranda Fricker calls “the importance to human well-being of the ability to function not only as a receiver [of knowledge and opinion] but also as a giver—one who . . . stands in presumptive relations of *epistemic reciprocity* with others”—so much so that Fricker ventures that “to be able to contribute to the common cognitive store . . . and thereby to enjoy the mutual regard and trust that go with that kind of epistemic reciprocity, looks a very strong candidate for a capability that is fundamental to human well-being.”<sup>59</sup>

And yet, as I have argued above, the importance of reciprocated speech to human well-being *can* in fact be overstated. Arendt does so when her insistence upon linguistic exchange as the cornerstone of world sharing and her adherence to what Degerman calls “the philosophical tendency to equate silence with suppression and injustice” undercut the possibility and dignity of rarer forms of human togetherness that do not presume equal communicative capacities.<sup>60</sup> This tendency is perhaps understandable in the face of the dire political crises of Arendt’s time and our own, but it risks obscuring the distinctive role that unreciprocated speech can play in relations of care with nonspeaking persons.

Though the practice of caring storytelling that I have sketched above is most obviously relevant when listeners are linguistically receptive, unreciprocated caring expression may be adaptable to a wider range of communicatively asymmetrical relationships, such as those between “normatively locutionary”

58 Sul, “The Structure of Silence in Depression,” 12. For example, Sul points out that relying exclusively on everyday forms of speech that implicitly demand responses when speaking to persons with speech impairments due to severe depressive episodes can backfire and exacerbate feelings of isolation: “even everyday conversation starters come to be overbearing during a severe depressive episode. . . . Others’ invitation to have a casual chat may inadvertently make explicit or actualise the sense of isolation that one exists in the world that is different in kind from the one others are navigating effortlessly” (11–15).

59 Fricker, “Epistemic Contribution as a Central Human Capability,” 79, 87.

60 Degerman, “Silence, Depression, and Bodily Doubt,” 127.

persons and prelinguistic children or persons with less understood neurocognitive disorders affecting language, such as persons with receptive aphasia (for whom linguistic comprehension is difficult), dementia, or severe depression.<sup>61</sup> Despite substantial differences, each of these contexts may require speakers to recalibrate their expression if they are to “foster a sense of togetherness . . . [that] require[s] *minimal* agential involvements” from the listener.<sup>62</sup> Adapting one’s expressive offerings to others’ needs and well-being sometimes means channeling communication into appropriate and accessible communicative mediums, even if those mediums “do not conform to the disciplinary semantics of proper language.”<sup>63</sup> As Bottenberg rightly points out, “speech is not the only communicative form that allows for sharing meaning across multiple conversants. . . . Holding eye contact with a loved one, sharing a laugh with a friend, or using one’s body’s other expressive capacities to convey messages are other satisfying ways to ‘speak’ with another, feel close, and share meaning.”<sup>64</sup> Unreciprocated storytelling, in a broader sense, can involve directing attention towards objects of shared significance and meaning through nonlinguistic communicative gestures, such as facial expressions, pointing, music, touch, or dance.<sup>65</sup>

Identifying appropriate mediums and gaining some measure of “fluency” in them is no simple task. It requires the development of what Lucienne Spencer calls a “communicative sensibility” that is attentive to a wider “gestural vocabulary” than we are often accustomed to.<sup>66</sup> While Spencer focuses on the possibility for such a sensibility to enable “a two-way interpersonal interaction to occur” between verbal and nonverbal persons, I take Arendt’s account of storytelling to indicate that there is also world-sharing potential in unreciprocated expressive offerings and encounters.<sup>67</sup> As with spoken storytelling, such offerings can become impositions when they are made too forcefully or insistently, particularly in circumstances in which listeners cannot reliably communicate a

61 Ferguson, “Silence,” 54.

62 Sul, “The Structure of Silence in Depression,” 19.

63 Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning*, 260, as cited in Brito Vieira, *Democracy and the Politics of Silence*, 2.

64 Bottenberg, “Epistemic Arrogance, Moral Harm, and Dementia,” 194–97.

65 For example, Simplican describes a spontaneous series of dance performances by men with intellectual disabilities attending a public chapter meeting of a self-advocacy organization: “Each was its own performance, as no one danced at the same time. Dancing encapsulates Arendt’s description of political action: it is public, spontaneous, and plural. It also demonstrates the way in which people can express themselves without speech” (*The Capacity Contract*, 111).

66 Spencer, “Epistemic Injustice in Late-Stage Dementia,” 66, 75.

67 Spencer, “Epistemic Injustice in Late-Stage Dementia,” 75.

preference for privacy. Both linguistic and nonlinguistic invitations into shared worlds of meaning therefore demand extraordinary tact and vigilance, to the extent that such practices may be inappropriate in the absence of a history of shared experiences and robust familiarity with the receiver's preferences.

That being the case, unreciprocated speech can find its place alongside other contextual strategies for what Andrew Solomon, discussing care for persons undergoing severe depressive episodes, calls "blunting isolation": "So many people have asked me what to do for depressed friends and relatives, and my answer is actually simple: blunt their isolation. Do it with cups of tea or with long talks or by sitting in a room nearby and staying silent or in whatever way suits the circumstances, but do that."<sup>68</sup> Caring storytelling is one way to blunt a nonspeaking person's isolation, but it should not necessarily take precedence over other modes of world sharing, such as mere physical proximity and what Jay Ryeong Sul calls "holding the silence together," which may be better suited to the circumstances or relationship in question.<sup>69</sup>

Returning to the article's motivating case, let me illustrate some of the foregoing with a few lived examples. I mentioned above that my wife sometimes spoke to her father over the phone. The content of those calls was often unremarkable. She sometimes talked about her day, her work, our plans for travel or weekend activities, the food we had cooked the night before, the television shows she thought he might like, and other topics of everyday life. These were not bardic tales of heroism, but they had a world-constituting power.<sup>70</sup> Through her careful performance of unreciprocated speech, and without the two of them actually seeing one another, my wife and her father were able to share in a world of language. Part of what made Ted's illness so difficult for him and those around him was that language *was* an important part of his flourishing—he was, among many other things, a writer and teacher. Perhaps receiving language in the form of stories and idle chatter, attuned to his person and adjusted for the sake of his inclusion, allowed Ted to, if not co-appear, coinhabit linguistically with his daughter. I hope that he saw himself and his own story reflected and reified in the details of her daily life and that he could share in the concerns of the world of speech and action through her efforts to include him in it.

Is this a political world? Perhaps not in the sense that would interest Arendt. Still, I am reluctant to cede that caring, unreciprocated speech is confined to

68 Solomon, *The Noonday Demon*, 437.

69 Sul, "The Structure of Silence in Depression," 16.

70 As Bottenberg argues, "It is possible to sustain and even deepen social bonds without relying on the rehearsal of biographical details" ("Epistemic Arrogance, Moral Harm, and Dementia," 192).

the private realm (which is often argued to be excessively restricted in Arendt's analysis). It is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly pursue the implications of my argument for Arendt's widely debated delineation between the public and the private.<sup>71</sup> But I take the form of linguistic world sharing that I have sketched above to be irreducibly political in a broader sense, roughly in line with Aristotle's original usage of *politikos* as the highest form of *koinōnia*: not merely living together but living well with and for one another. As Marlene Sokolon puts it,

Aristotle considers the *polis* the highest form of community (*koinōnia*) because it exists not for the sake of merely living together, but for the sake of living well. Yet living well also requires attention to living in common. For this reason Aristotle devotes much attention in his political works not only to discussions of regime type and justice, but also to discussions of household relationships, ethical virtue, education, and various levels of friendship, including economic partnerships.<sup>72</sup>

Ted's home was not a public space, but the shared way of life that emerged in it was akin to *koinōnia politike* in important ways. When we visited, Ted would be helped to the living room at eight thirty every morning. His chair was positioned in the center of the house and angled so that he could see across the living room and into the kitchen. It was impossible to move through the home without passing him. The living room was a center of activity for our family to have meals, talk, watch television, and play with Huckleberry, and every day invariably started and ended there. When Ted was removed to the privacy of his bedroom for rest or care, he exited this "public" arena. At other times, he participated in the flow of household life in the position of auditor and listener. His presence in the room changed the tenor of our words, and our conversations with one another swelled to include him. In these ways, there was a shared, linguistic, semipublic life within the household that Ted entered, exited, and held in common with his family.

Though this is not an ideal or scalable model of political coexistence, my view is that a linguistic world shot through with appearance, speech, recognition, memory, and belonging was maintained, however imperfectly, between Ted and his family. Ultimately, reading Arendt helps me understand the stakes of losing linguistic expression, as well as how unreciprocated speech might be

71 For classical critiques of Arendt on the public/private divide see Pitkin, "Justice"; and Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. For recent engagement on Arendt's private/public distinction in the context of care, see Chaberty and Lemaitre, "Thinking About the Institutionalization of Care with Hannah Arendt."

72 Sokolon, *Political Emotions*, 29.

wielded to provide care and hospitality to persons who would otherwise find it difficult to retain their place in shared worlds of linguistic meaning. Unreciprocated speech surely invites dangers, misunderstandings, and frustrations. But refusing to speak with nonspeaking persons as a way of steering clear of the hazards of hermeneutical imposition is not a neutral act; it carries its own risks. Prominent among them is that of foreclosing surviving possibilities for linguistic connection. In certain circumstances, unreciprocated speech is practically all that remains of a shared linguistic world. Surely the coincidence of speaker and listener is enough to affirm the latter's belonging and to say with Arendt and Scotus, "*Amo—volo ut sis*"—I love you, I want you to be.<sup>73</sup>

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73 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, 144.

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