Toward a New Democratic Theory of Expertise

Siri Sylvan
Abstract

In contemporary society, citizens have access to an unprecedented amount of expertise. However, the tremendous growth of scientific knowledge in late modernity has not translated into greater certainty. Instead, citizens are under pressure to become experts themselves, “experts on experts”. How should we understand the democratic problem reflected in the present crisis of expertise, and what could it mean to respond constructively to it? This thesis addresses this overarching question by critically examining the existing normative approaches to expertise in democracy, and by developing a new approach, drawing on the political thought of Hannah Arendt.

Scientific knowledge has often been regarded as apolitical and serving a purely functional role in democratic politics. This assumption no longer appears tenable, given the insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS). In this dissertation, I take the theoretical challenge from STS as my starting point to examine existing normative perspectives on the relationship between expertise and democracy. The two predominant approaches, termed ‘the instrumental’ and ‘the procedural approach’, both embody a Kantian notion of public reason as the foundation of universal legitimacy. However, in my critical examination, I find both approaches insufficient, as they overlook the more existential dimension of the relationship between knowledge and politics.

To develop a new approach, I turn to the political thought of the 20th-century thinker Hannah Arendt. By unpacking Arendt’s notion of world alienation, I develop a new interpretation of the democratic problem reflected in the contemporary crisis of expertise. According to this interpretation, the fundamental issue is not that citizens could fail in their new role as experts on experts, but rather that they could resign from it completely.

In response to this predicament, I examine three of Arendt’s central concepts – authority, the public, and judgment – and show how they can be utilized to construct a new normative approach to expertise. According to this approach, which I call ‘existential’, experts play a crucial role in democracy as world-builders, constructing public spaces for making sense of knowledge. In their role as world-builders, the experts support public judgment – not by providing citizens a critical standard for rationally adjudicating between competing claims, but by constructing the public contexts where the burden of judgment can be experienced as meaningful and tolerable.

Keywords: Expertise, Democratic Theory, Hannah Arendt, Judgment, Public Reason, Science and Technology Studies

Siri Sylvan, Department of Government, Box 514, Uppsala University, SE-75120 Uppsala, Sweden.

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“Thinking”, Arendt writes, “is a solitary but not a lonely activity”. All thinkers, all thoughts, and indeed, all dissertations owe their existence to the fact that we share the world with other people. This thesis is the product of many hours of solitary work, but it could never have been written if I had not been so warmly welcomed into the academic world by the people at the Uppsala Department of Government. I am deeply grateful for all the help and support that I have received from colleagues, friends, and family during these seven years of doing a PhD. Here, I want to take the opportunity to thank some of you.

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Abbreviations

BPF  H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*
CR  H. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*
EJ  H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*
EU  H. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. by J. Kohn
HC  H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*
LKPP  H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. by R. Beiner
LMT  H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*
LMW  H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Willing*
MDT  H. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*
OR  H. Arendt, *On Revolution*
OT  H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
PP  H. Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. by J. Kohn
RJ  H. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. by J. Kohn
TWB  H. Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister*, ed. by J. Kohn
Chapter 1
Why Do We Need a New Democratic Theory of Expertise?

Very few of our beliefs are based on first-hand knowledge. In modern society, most of our knowledge is acquired through trust or deference to authority. The modern condition is, therefore, one of extensive epistemic dependence (Hardwig 1985). When citizens form opinions about common issues, they depend on the information and informed perspectives they receive from secondary sources, such as news media, television, books, podcasts, and social media. In this context, scientific expertise stands out as the preeminent source of knowledge in the public realm. Science is not just an indispensable resource in the public administration of government decision-making. It has also become a crucial element of the public opinion-formation that runs in parallel with the policy-making process in democratic societies. Many political problems are first recognized and described by scientists and academics and are thus introduced into the public realm by scientific experts (Weingart 2002). Climate change, of course, is a case in point. The expanded role for experts in modern politics means that expertise has become increasingly important also for defining the problems that it is then called upon to solve (Boehmer-Chri-tiansen 1995).

However, expertise has not only become an increasingly significant factor in modern democratic politics, it also finds itself in crisis (Eyal 2019; Weingart 1999; 2001; 2002; Weingart & Maasen 2005; Limoges 1993; Ezrahi 2003; Stehr & Grundmann 2011). Public controversies surrounding science and academic knowledge have become endemic in modern democratic societies. One example is the debate during the pandemic on how to assess the validity and relevance of existing scientific knowledge and interpret the meaning of the precautionary principle in a situation defined by deep uncertainty. Even today, long after the pandemic has been declared over by WHO, there is continued disagreement and uncertainty about the lessons to be learned from this event. This example illustrates the claim – argued by sociologists of science – that the expectation for science to deliver certainty and consensus has been disappointed in modernity (see Funtowicz & Ravetz 1990; Stehr 2001; 2002).

1 In this dissertation, I will use the word ‘science’ in a broad sense, as including all forms of academic inquiry, not just natural science.
Maasen & Weingart 2005). The tremendous expansion of knowledge in late modernity has not reduced the level of conflict and uncertainty in the public realm; rather, science itself has increasingly become a subject of political contestation.

The contemporary crisis of expertise serves as the empirical background from which this thesis takes its point of departure. However, what I aim to contribute to the discussion on the crisis is not new empirical evidence but a normative discussion of the problem that it illustrates. This problem, I argue, is one that democratic theorists must address. The present crisis not only creates a problem for knowledge – it also reflects a democratic problem of the first order.

Given our extensive epistemic dependence on scientific experts in modern society, it is easy to see how the present crisis poses a problem for knowledge. If experts were to lose their position of authority in the public realm – so that expert opinions would no longer carry any weight beyond the opinion of lay persons – we would expect that this loss of authority would greatly reduce the capacity of both citizens and democratic governments to make informed and well-grounded decisions. For example, consider the expert claim that the world is now approaching a climate tipping-point, a point of no return where disastrous environmental consequences become unavoidable. This assertion is not a determined fact comparable to the fact that the global temperature has risen dramatically since the Industrial Revolution. Rather, it is a prospective judgment, an assessment of the future based on existing knowledge. Nevertheless, if expert judgments of this sort were perceived merely as one possible belief among many, we have reason to worry that this failure of expert authority would further erode the capacity of democracy to respond effectively to urgent problems.

However, the central premise of this thesis is that the crisis also creates a problem for democracy. More specifically, my assumption is that it poses a problem for democratic opinion-formation. If experts were to lose their position of authority in the public realm, it would become difficult – if not practically impossible – for non-expert citizens to distinguish between scientifically robust knowledge claims and pseudoscience, ideological or commercial propaganda, or mere speculations. Such uncertainty about knowledge not only weakens our capacity for rational decision-making but also makes public opinion vulnerable to manipulation. When public opinion is no longer a manifestation of freedom, but of manipulation, democracy is delegitimized. The crisis therefore actualizes a democratic problem that calls for further normative exploration. How can public judgment be supported, given the vulnerability of the democratic public realm? That is the research problem that I will address in this thesis.

The focus of this dissertation is on scientists and academics, not bureaucrats or professionals. Scientific experts are experts by virtue of their credentials, of having a doctorate degree. However, according to my conceptualization –
which I will return to later in this chapter – the expert role differs from that of researchers and university educators. What I will examine is the public role of scientific experts. Thus, on this account, scientists are not considered experts when they engage in research activities or teach at universities. They assume the expert role only when they leave their labs or lecture halls to participate in discussions that take place in the public realm and relate their knowledge to issues of common concern.

In this dissertation, I will critically examine the existing normative perspectives on expertise in democracy and develop a new perspective inspired by the 20th-century political thinker Hannah Arendt (1907–1975). I will show that Arendt can help us develop a new interpretation of the democratic problem reflected in the contemporary crisis of expertise, and that we can use elements of her political thought to construct a new normative approach in response to it. Essentially, the argument that I will make in this thesis is that the role of experts in the public realm corresponds with the existential – and not only the epistemic or rational – conditions for democracy. Democracy needs experts not only to support the capacity of citizens to rationally adjudicate between competing claims but also to support their capacity to cope constructively with the burden of having to make such judgments. In other words, the approach I propose holds that experts play a role in not only rationalizing public opinion-formation but also in making it meaningful and bearable.

The rest of this chapter will proceed as follows. Section one provides a brief introduction to Arendt and discusses her relevance to this dissertation. Section two specifies the aim and research questions. Section three presents the empirical backstory that informs my interpretation of the contemporary crisis of expertise. In sections four and five, I will situate the research problem that the thesis responds to by discussing what I describe as ‘the conventional view’ of expertise in democratic theory and the challenges posed to it by Science and Technology Studies (STS). Sections six and seven discuss the two main concepts of the thesis: ‘expertise’ and ‘democracy.’ Section eight describes my methodological approach and, finally, section nine provides an outline of the thesis.

The Relevance of Hannah Arendt

This is a dissertation about the role of experts in democracy. It is also a dissertation that draws extensively on the ideas and arguments of Hannah Arendt. At first glance, Arendt may seem like an odd choice for a thesis on expertise in democracy. The word ‘expert’ hardly appears in Arendt’s work, and when she does mention it, it is clear that she views it as something altogether apolitical. In Arendt’s view, expertise is something that pertains to warfare or work; it is a concept that applies to the relationship between a master and their raw material, not the political co-existence of human beings in the plural. Moreover, Arendt did not describe herself as a democratic theorist, nor is her
work interpreted as unequivocally democratic. She is most famous for her analysis of totalitarianism, which she argues must be understood as a unique form of government, distinct from tyranny. Nazism and Stalinism, she asserts, introduced the world to an entirely unprecedented form of rule, a rule defined by its use of terror in pursuit of total domination (see *OT*: ch. 13). The impulse behind totalitarian government is not the desire of the ruler to impose his own singular will upon subjects. Instead, it is a form of rule that exploits the human desire to transform its condition. By siding with the anti-human forces of nature or history, the totalitarian regimes attempted to create a new, more God-like type of man (ibid).

Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism has continued to inspire political theorists concerned with freedom and its vulnerability in modern political life, even after the disappearance of totalitarian regimes. However, Arendt never systematically addressed the concept of democracy. Her attitude toward democracy has often been interpreted as ambivalent (see, e.g., Canovan 1978; Brunkhorst 2000). While some scholars interpret Arendt as an advocate of grassroots democracy (see, e.g., Allen 1983; Isaac 1994), others have identified a notable strand of elitism in her work (Wolin 1983).

Arendt was indeed deeply critical of one of the core concepts of democratic theory: sovereignty. In her view, the tendency to understand political freedom in terms of sovereignty – the rule of a united and indivisible popular will – is one of the greatest misconceptions in our history of political thought (*BPF*: pp. 162-163). Arendt’s ambivalence toward democracy and democratic theory has also been connected to the sharp distinction she makes between “the political” and “the social,” and her contention that human freedom is jeopardized by the tendency in modern society to blur the boundary between the political and the social realms. For example, Sheldon Wolin (1983) argues that Arendt was a democratic skeptic, and that her skepticism toward democracy was rooted in the correct intuition that democratic politics is driven by the impulse to transcend the distinction between the political and the social. Historically, democracy has been synonymous with the opportunity of the poor to exploit their sheer multitude for political leverage. “Democracy is the attempt of the many to reverse the natural cycle of power, to translate social weakness into political power in order to alleviate the consequences of what is not so much their condition as their lottery” (ibid). On Wolin’s account, democracy invites exactly “the rise of the social” that Arendt lamented (see *HC*: pp. 38-49).

I will not contest the claim that Arendt’s political thought contains elements of elitism, or tensions between elitist and participatory conceptions of politics. However, I do wish to challenge the view that her work has little to offer to democratic theory and nothing to tell us about the role of experts in the democratic public realm. Although Arendt herself never addressed the relationship between democracy and expertise, I will argue that her political thought proves an astutely relevant source for rethinking the democratic problem reflected in the contemporary crisis. I will also show that we can use elements
of her work to construct a new understanding of expert authority and its relationship to public judgment.

Arendt did not call herself a democratic theorist, but many have stressed her relevance for this field of study (see, e.g., Isaac 1994; Benhabib 2000; Kalyvas 2008; Zerilli 2016; Näsström 2021). However, there is considerable disagreement in the secondary literature as to how we should understand the nature of her contribution. Some argue that Arendt’s relevance for democratic theory lies in her insights into the nature of extraordinary political events such as revolutions, but that she has less to teach us about the ordinary, regular operations of democratic politics (see, e.g., Canovan 1978; Kateb 2000). Others emphasize her distinction between power and violence, and take inspiration from her conception of political speech and action as inherently intersubjective and pluralist. For example, both Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib acknowledge their indebtedness to Arendt, whose work has been an important influence behind their respective theories of deliberative democracy (Habermas 1977; Benhabib 2000). According to Benhabib, Arendt’s conception of the political “is characterized by the willingness to give reasons in public, to entertain others’ points of view and interests, even when they contradict one’s own, and by the attempt to transform the dictates of self-interest into a common public goal” (2000: p. 146). In this rendering, Arendt’s conception of politics indeed appears as the forerunner to the notion of deliberative democracy that Benhabib herself defends.

My interpretation of Arendt is a different one. The interpretation that I will advance holds that Arendt’s relevance to contemporary democratic theory lies in her insights into the existential underpinnings of democracy. Arendt, I suggest, is an existentialist thinker in the sense that her political thought pivots on the problem of human existence. Unlike other creatures, human beings are not destined by their nature: they are free. However, for Arendt, freedom is more than just an ontological condition – a condition that we are “doomed” to by birth (LMW: p. 217). Human beings can be free in a meaningful sense only to the extent that they actively affirm their freedom, which means that they must assume the burden of judgment that accompanies their condition as free beings. For Arendt, action and judgment are indeed “revolutionary” and “miraculous” human faculties – but her point was never to reject the need for routine, order, or political stability more generally. Her point was, rather, to stress our

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2 Arendt defines power as that which keeps the public realm in existence: it is the “potential” that arises when individuals come together and organize. It is not the property of individuals, nor is it a measurable or unchangeable entity that can be stored and used for later. Power is actualized through the human capability to act in concert –“power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disappear” (HC: p. 200). Violence, Arendt insists, is the opposite of power: it is inherently destructive, mute, and impotent. Violence can destroy power but never replace it. “[O]ut of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power” (CR: p. 152).
uniquely human capacity to resist causal chains of necessity and assert our freedom to begin anew. This freedom, however, can prevail only if we continue to “feel pleased” with it. Freedom can be sustained over time only if we remain able and willing to endure its tremendous responsibility and uncertainty.

In my interpretation, Arendt’s relevance for contemporary democratic theory lies in her original understanding of the democratic problem described on page 2, that is, the vulnerability of the public realm and the challenge it poses to democratic opinion-formation. For Arendt, the issue is not so much a matter of rational adjudication (how to distinguish reasonable claims from unreasonable ones?). Rather, the most pressing issue is how to endure and find meaning in the task itself. In essence, the question that she brings to our attention is that of how to understand the conditions under which human beings can cope constructively with the burden of having to continuously make up their own judgments anew.

My reading of Arendt is in this regard indebted to Linda Zerilli (2016), who has previously argued that Arendt’s theory of judgment sets her apart from political thinkers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, who have also explored the meaning of democratic opinion-formation. Rawls and Habermas defend different normative ideals; however, what they share is a neo-Kantian notion of judgment as the practice through which human beings can claim (universal) normativity for their political beliefs. In contrast, Arendt helps shift our attention to an alternative notion of judgment as the practice by which human beings affirm their freedom and accept to bear its costs. In her theory of judgment, the emphasis is not on the question of how to rationalize public discourse but on “the prior question of what it means to have a world in common” (Zerilli 2016: p. 267) – or, as I would put it, what it means to sustain a public realm of meaningful interaction.

Freedom is indeed demanding. It is not necessarily a pleasant condition, but can also be experienced as an unbearable burden. This basic assumption is key to understanding Arendt’s critique of modernity. The modern age, which took off in the 17th and 18th centuries, has gradually liberated us from the bonds of traditional society. The release from traditional and religious authority means that the external obstacles to public and individual enlightenment have increasingly withered away. In modernity, human beings have been given the freedom to “use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another” (Kant 1784/2009: p. 1). Enlightenment – that is, “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (ibid) – now exists as a real possibility, at least for those who are courageous enough to live by Kant’s motto: *Sapere Aude!* Dare to be wise!

The classic Enlightenment narrative is hopeful. It is a story that stresses the emancipatory promise of modernity. The story that Arendt tells us about modernity, however, is a different one. Hers is not a story about enlightenment, but about “dark times” – a phrase that she borrows from Bertolt Brecht to
describe the socio-historical circumstances where the power of the public realm to shed light on human affairs is exhausted. In Arendt’s vocabulary, “darkness” does not refer specifically to the political crimes of the 20th century; instead, it is better understood as denoting the modern eclipse of the public realm. “Darkness, as [Arendt] would have us understand it, does not name the genocides, purges, and hunger from a specific era. Instead, darkness refers to the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden” (Berkowitz 2010: p. 3). In other words, the expression should be read as denoting the circumstances where truths can hide in plain sight. Darkness is the condition under which public speech no longer serves to reveal the meaning of worldly facts or events but to “sweep them under the carpet,” or, alternatively, to bury them in the constant chatter of trivial talk (MDT: p. viii-ix). Under such conditions, Arendt warns, reality itself is jeopardized.

In dark times, public speech becomes meaningless because freedom is no longer affirmed. According to Arendt – or at least, that is how I interpret her – the modern predicament is not about ignorance, irrationality, or moral vice, but about the sense of meaninglessness that invades the modern world. In modernity, human beings have received access to more knowledge than ever before. Yet, scholars of various stripes have identified modernity with the rise of anti-intellectualism, or a growing inability to judge (see, e.g., Fromm 1941; Adorno & Horkheimer 1947; Ellul 1965; Marcuse 1964). The simultaneous growth and dissemination of knowledge and the growing resistance to knowledge and the knowledgeable may strike us as paradoxical. From an Arendtian perspective, however, the loss of judgment in modernity does not reflect a lack of knowledge, but alienation from knowledge.

The estrangement from the common world, which Arendt identifies as the defining feature of modernity, reveals itself as a divorce between thought and world, knowledge and meaning. Even though modern human beings have access to more knowledge than ever before, they are less well-equipped to actively reflect on it, and to identify with the demands that it places on them. In Arendt’s characterization, thus, the darkness of the modern public realm is the manifestation of a vicious cycle of alienation and resignation. In her story about modernity, the breakdown of traditional hierarchies has indeed released individuals from the shackles of the past. However, this liberation only means that the burden of freedom is now ours to carry. The loss of tradition and religion means that we have been left to our own devices. We can no longer fall back upon the continuity secured by tradition, or rest assured by the religious promise of divine salvation. In modernity, the individual is thrown back upon themselves, with nothing firm to hold on to.

Arendt’s theory of judgment calls our attention to the existential – not the rational or epistemic – conditions for democracy. In the political science literature, it is widely assumed that democracy can prevail only if it continues to win the support of its citizens (see, e.g., Lipset 1959; Norris 2011; Foa & Mounk 2016; 2017). The democratic system becomes an empty shell unless it
is perceived as legitimate by citizens. In the normative debate on the meaning of democratic legitimacy, instrumentalism and proceduralism represent the two main perspectives (Peter 2023; Destri 2021; Valentini 2013).

According to the instrumental view, democracy acquires legitimacy by producing good outcomes, such as welfare and individual freedom (see, e.g., Arneson 2003; Wall 2007). If democratic legitimacy is understood as altogether instrumental, this means that democratic institutions are legitimate only to the extent that they produce better results compared to all other viable systems of government.

In contrast, the procedural view holds that democracy is legitimate by virtue of some inherent feature of the democratic process. For example, Christina Lafont (2019) posits that democracy draws its legitimacy from the exclusive capacity of the democratic procedure to realize (albeit imperfectly) the ideal of self-government. There are no guarantees that democracies will always outperform autocracies in terms of the quality of their decisions. However, even poor political decisions are legitimate if citizens can recognize themselves as included in the process leading up to them. Other variants of proceduralism hold that democracy is legitimate because it embodies the moral principle of equal respect (see e.g., Griffin 2003; Christiano 2008; Waldron 1999), or because it embodies a spirit of openness and fallibilism, and hence assists “our endogenous need to change previously made minds and decisions, with no deadline for the attaining of the correct outcome and no final outcome to attain” (Urbinati 2014: p. 98).

In this thesis, I will suggest that there is an additional side to democratic legitimacy. With Arendt, we can see that the normative basis of democracy is not only instrumental and/or procedural – it also has an existential dimension. To sustain itself over time, democracy must not only be instrumental to the needs and interests of its citizens, or make them part of an inherently valuable procedure of political decision-making. It must also provide the conditions under which citizens can cope constructively with the burden of judgment that it places on their shoulders. If citizens lose their will or ability to affirm freedom, and hence resign from the task of actively making up their own minds about common issues, democracy loses its legitimacy. When citizens resign from judging, the democratic process of opinion-formation becomes not exactly irrational but meaningless – hollow and deprived of any real substance. In other words, democracy is existential in the sense that it can be sustained only if citizens remain able and willing to pay the price for their democratic membership in a common world.

What I will show in this thesis is not only that Arendt can help us develop a new interpretation of the contemporary crisis of expertise and the democratic problem it reflects. I will also show that her political thought contains the conceptual building blocks that we need to construct a normative response to the predicament that she identifies. In contrast with other existential philosophers
– who tend to embrace an ethos of unworldly heroism and superiority – Arendt’s thought carries the seeds of a more constructive political approach. In this dissertation, I will extract these elements and use them to construct a new normative approach to expertise. According to this approach, the experts have an important role in democracy as “world-builders,” constructing and cultivating meaningful public contexts where the common world can come into our vision as an object of judgment. In this role, the experts support the democratic process of opinion-formation – not by prescribing citizens a method or procedure for adjudicating between competing claims, but by building the contexts where scientific knowledge can begin to make sense. Such sense-making, I argue, is crucial for democracy, as it contributes to the conditions under which human beings can experience their democratic freedom as meaningful and tolerable.

**Aim and Research Questions**

The general aim of this dissertation is to construct a new democratic theory of expertise. Specifically, I will examine the existing normative perspectives on expertise within democracy with a critical eye, and develop a new approach inspired by Arendt’s political thought.

Democratic theory is the academic discipline that examines normative and conceptual inquiries about democracy: the meaning of the concept, its normative justification, the nature of democratic problems, as well as the solutions by which they can be remedied. A democratic theory is therefore not the same as the theories of democracy and democratization that are used and developed in empirical political science. The object of study for democratic theorists is not existing democratic (or undemocratic) systems of government but democracy as a concept and a normative ideal. In other words, the aim of this dissertation is *not* to give an empirical account of how the role of experts in democracy has evolved historically, test empirical hypotheses about the relationship between democracy and expertise, or undertake comparative analyses of how expertise is used in different democratic contexts. Neither will I study public attitudes toward experts. While such research endeavors could improve our empirical understanding of the relationship between democracy and expertise, they do not allow us to attain a new normative understanding of the democratic role and value of expertise.

A normative democratic theory must also be distinguished from a theory of institutional design. Theories of institutional design examine the architecture of democratic systems and consider how institutional mechanisms can be designed to improve their functioning. Such theories may therefore consider how democratic systems can benefit from the epistemic values brought to politics by expertise while preserving other values such as inclusion, accountability, and equality. A *normative* democratic theory, in contrast, theorizes the democratic value of expertise, as well as the democratic problem that appears when
expert authority fails. In this dissertation, I aim to develop a new democratic theory of this kind.

To meet this aim, the thesis will respond to the following three research questions:

i. What are the existing normative approaches to expertise in democratic theory, and why are they insufficient?
ii. How can Arendt’s political thought assist us in conceptualizing a new perspective on expertise and its contemporary crisis?
iii. Based on these considerations, how can we construct a new normative approach to expertise in democracy?

The thesis is organized into three parts: a critical, a conceptual, and a constructive section. In the critical part (Chapter 2), I will examine the existing literature within democratic theory and reconstruct the two currently predominant normative approaches to expertise. These approaches will then be subject to critical examination. In the conceptual part (Chapters 3 and 4), I will turn to Arendt’s work for the purpose of developing a new theoretical perspective on expertise and its contemporary crisis. In Chapter 3, I will examine how Arendt’s critical analysis of modernity can help us develop a new interpretation of the crisis and the democratic problem it reflects. In Chapter 4, I will draw on Arendt’s work to construct a new conceptual understanding of expert authority and how it relates to public judgment. This I will do by examining and appropriating three Arendtian concepts: authority, the public, and judgment. Finally, in the constructive part (Chapter 5), I will put together the new normative approach and bring it into relief by comparing it with the two approaches examined in Chapter 2. In this part, I will also discuss its implications in more normative terms.

Backstory: Knowledge Society and Its Crisis
As stated at the outset of this chapter, my aim is not to study the crisis of expertise empirically but to discuss, in normative terms, the democratic problem it reflects and how to respond to it. I will not present any new empirical evidence supporting the claim that modern democracies are currently experiencing a crisis of expert authority but will simply assume that this is the case. However, my understanding of the crisis is informed by prior sociological research on the relationship between politics and science, and how this relationship has evolved in late modernity. Allow me, therefore, to elaborate a bit more on the empirical backstory that informs my normative discussion about expert authority and the democratic problem entailed by its present crisis.

The conflict-ridden relationship between knowledge and politics in the contemporary public realm is sometimes discussed under the rubric of “post-
truth politics.” In 2016, ‘post-truth’ was declared “Word of the Year” by the Oxford English Dictionary, which defined it as “relating to or denoting the circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (OED 2016). Since then, it has emerged as one of the major buzzwords in our time. However, critics have questioned whether this description of reality is empirically supported, and indeed, whether post-truth is even sufficiently conceptualized to be useful in academic discussions (Hyvönen 2018). The concept of post-truth appears to suggest that modern societies have left an era of truthful politics behind and that citizens are now turning indifferent or hostile toward the very concept of truth, preferring a politics based on passion or charisma. This image conjured by the concept of post-truth is catchy, but unconvincing for at least three reasons.

First, the contemporary crisis cannot be attributed to recent changes in public attitudes or media consumption. The tension between science and politics has been studied and debated by social scientists for several decades (see, e.g., Weinberg 1972; Nelkin 1975; Jasanoff 1987). Indeed, the debate about the crisis of expertise has emerged in tandem with the growth of modern knowledge society. As Gil Eyal (2019) contends, it is therefore misleading to describe our present predicament as a “one-sided assault on science” (p. 4). This framing of the crisis obscures the dialectic of “the two-headed pushmi-pullyu of unprecedented reliance on science and expertise coupled with increased suspicion, skepticism, and dismissal of scientific findings, expert opinion, or even of whole branches of investigation” (ibid). The concept of post-truth, therefore, provides an imbalanced view of the evolving relationship between science and politics. The post-truth narrative highlights the anxiety that scientific authority is being eroded by harmful politicization but obscures the parallel anxiety that the extensive scientization of politics renders social issues and relationships incontestable in a technocratic fashion.

Secondly, the concept of post-truth assumes a questionable notion of the crisis as reflecting public attitudes of indifference or hostility toward truth and knowledge as such. A more credible interpretation suggests that scientific knowledge claims become contested precisely because truth and knowledge have emerged as such important values in the modern political culture (see, e.g., Stehr 2001; Weingart 2002; Eyal 2019). In the modern public realm, it is science – not religion or tradition – that has the capacity to bestow legitimacy on public descriptions of reality. This, in turn, strongly motivates political actors to claim the name of science for their own worldviews.

Finally, the concept of post-truth appears to suggest that public controversies about science originate from a theoretical critique of truth as a metaphysical concept, or from epistemological critiques of standard assumptions in the philosophy of science. According to some commentators, the contemporary crisis can at least partly be blamed on a group of esoteric French theorists, whose philosophies have allegedly brainwashed citizens into believing that
there is no such thing as objective knowledge.⁴ In my view, this hypothesis is unconvincing – not least because it seems to greatly exaggerate the political influence of philosophers. Political contestation of science is political, not theoretical. Our contemporary impasse is therefore more aptly described by Sophia Rosenfeld (2018), who asserts that “[p]ost-truth is, at heart, a struggle over people as holders of epistemic authority and over their different methods of inquiry and proof in an intensely partisan era” (p. 20, italics in the original).

The political struggle over truth and reality in the contemporary public realm is not the result of a coup or conspiracy but is better conceived as part of a more general and longstanding crisis of authority (see Ezrahi 2003; Enroth 2023). Science, which has traditionally been regarded as an apolitical source of authority, capable of imposing limits and discipline on politics, now finds itself incapable of speaking with a unanimous voice (Ezrahi 2003; Latour 1998). Thus, instead of describing our contemporary predicament as a matter of post-truth politics, I suggest that it is better approached as a crisis of expert authority.

In late modernity, scientific knowledge has increasingly become an object of political contention. This politicization of science is not a trend that has emerged only recently with the evolution of social media but a development that has unfolded over several decades. As some scholars have pointed out, scientific knowledge became politically contested already in the 1930s, during the struggle over the New Deal (see Jasanoff & Simmet 2017: p. 757; Eyal 2019: pp. 14-15). The politicization of science is thus a longstanding development, which has been studied and debated by social scientists since the 1960s. However, in the sociological literature, this development is not described as the result of a deliberate political campaign against science, an “assault.” Rather, it is described as one side of a deep-seated social dynamic – a dynamic that also involves the growth, proliferation, commodification, and increasing significance of science in modern society. In essence, the politicization of science and the “expertization” of politics are not opposites but rather two sides of the same coin.

Since the end of the Second World War, the relationship between knowledge and politics has undergone a dramatic transformation. During these decades, modern democratic societies have undergone a transition from

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⁴ For example, the idea that postmodern philosophy is responsible for the present crisis is argued by Lee McIntyre (2018). “Even if right-wing politicians and other science deniers were not reading Derrida and Foucault, the germ of the idea made its way to them: science does not have a monopoly on the truth” (pp. 139-141). Against such allegations, I agree with Yaron Ezrahi (2003), who asserts that “[i]t is much more promising and fruitful […] to search for the forces which have been eroding modern coherences and blurring former boundaries in the accumulative effects of the evolution of modern individualism, the mass media culture of our time or other aspects of Globalism than in articles published in journals like Social Text” (p. 72).
one social order to another: from an ‘industrial’ to a ‘knowledge society.’ According to Nico Stehr (2001), this shift can be understood as the emergence of a society where knowledge is not “just a constitutive feature of our modern economy but a basic organizational principle of the way we run our lives” (p. 89). Knowledge has certainly always been an important element in the organizational structure of human societies. However, in the modern knowledge society, knowledge increasingly competes with property as the most important factor in the economy. Moreover, the economy is increasingly an economy of information rather than one focused only on material goods (see Bell 1974). While the hallmark of industrial society is the acceleration of its production and distribution of goods, knowledge society is defined by its acceleration in knowledge production and dissemination.

The evolution of modern knowledge society can be understood as composed of three salient developments. Taken together, these developments have had a transformative impact on the social relationship between knowledge and politics. As such, they constitute the socio-historical background against which the contemporary crisis unfolds. Let us consider each of them in turn.

The first development is what we could describe as the scientization of society. Scientization is the process by which science has become the paradigm of knowledge in the modern world. This not only means that more aspects of the human world have become subject to systematic inquiry, but also that scientific concepts and methods of inquiry have increasingly been transferred to new areas and contexts (Böhme & Stehr 1986). One example of this development is the professionalization of occupations such as care work, social work, and teaching. Historically, these were trades that relied mainly on practical experience and knowledge transmitted from one generation of workers to the next. Today, in contrast, they have become professions that require university-level training, and practitioners are now expected to operate according to available scientific evidence of best practices. The scientization of society has not only transformed the labor market and public welfare systems but has also had a transformative impact on democratic politics. Over the past 60-70 years, scientific policy advice to governments has been institutionalized on a large scale, and scientific findings and arguments have become integrated into political discourse and decision-making. Following Sheila Jasanoff (1990), we can now describe expertise as virtually a “fifth branch” of government. Thus, science is not just a factor in the administration and implementation of political decisions but has also become a significant source of political legitimacy in the debate that precedes such decision-making. This expertization of political discourse is manifest in the proliferation of concepts such as ‘risk analysis’ and ‘evidence-based policy.’

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4 This concept refers to the idea that governments should devise policies that are supported by a large amount of scientific research. According to data, made available by Google Ngram...
plays an increasing role in defining the problems for which it is then called to
give advice about once these problems are on the political agenda” (Weingart

The second significant development can be characterized as the _democra-
tization_ of expertise. In parallel with the scientization of politics, modern so-
ciety has seen the rise of new demands for expert accountability, transparency,
and public involvement in expert decision-making (Maasen & Weingart
2005). In response to such demands, new institutional innovations such as de-
liberative polls (see Fishkin 2009) and consensus conferences (see Dryzek &
Tucker 2008) have been promoted by scholars and activists as a way of both
enlightening public opinion and enhancing the legitimacy of expert arrange-
ments. Moreover, expertise has also been democratized in the sense that it has
become more accessible. Access to scientific information and advice is no
longer reserved for the elite but is now open to competing actors across the
The great expansion of higher education is one part of this development. In
the early 1960s, higher education was a privilege for the few. In 2021, almost
half of the aggregate population in OECD between 24-34 years had attained a
tertiary degree (OECD 2022). Consequently, scientific information has not
only been made more available – a greater share of the population now re-
ceives the type of education that is needed to understand and assess scientific
reports. Expertise has, therefore, become democratized in the sense that sci-
entific knowledge and expert advice can no longer be regarded as a resource
that is only available to the political elite. The hierarchies and thresholds that
limit access to participation in public discussions about knowledge have been
leveled out (see e.g., Limoges 1994; Weingart 2001; Weingart & Maasen
2005). In modern knowledge society, science has, to some extent, become a
mass phenomenon.

Finally, the third significant development is the _politicization_ of science.
This trend appears as the unintentional but unavoidable consequence of the
other two. As Stehr (2001) asserts, the acceleration in the production and dis-
semination of knowledge not only brings new opportunities for action but also
new uncertainties. Scientific methods of inquiry – no matter how sophisticated
– can never eliminate the arbitrariness, risks, and unforeseen consequences
inherent in human interaction. Scientists cannot tell us how the future will
unfold but only provide us with more or less qualified hypotheses and proba-
bilities (p. 91). They draw our attention to societal risks and possible con-
sequences, but they cannot provide any definite answers on how to respond to
them. Thus, in modern knowledge society, science has, somewhat paradoxi-
cally, become a source of uncertainty (see Funtowicz & Ravetz 1990; Stehr
2001; Stehr & Grundmann 2011). The uncertainty of expertise does not reveal

Viewer, the use of this expression has skyrocketed since the 1990s, when it first came into
widespread use.
a deficit of knowledge but is “a constitutive feature of knowledge, as well as of the contexts in which knowledge must work” (Stehr & Grundmann 2011: p. 106). This constitutive feature of expertise – its inability to eliminate uncertainty – makes it open to contestation. In a society where science has become a commodity and a significant source of legitimacy, it is bound to become an object of political struggle. “If knowledge is the main constitutive characteristic of modern society, then the production, reproduction, distribution and realization of knowledge cannot avoid becoming politicized” (Stehr 2001: p. 92).

The dynamic of modern knowledge society is succinctly described by Peter Weingart as the “recursive coupling” of science and politics (2001: p. 704), or “the loss of distance” between the two (2002). The scientization of society has transformed science and academic knowledge into a source of political legitimacy, and hence a much sought-after political currency. However, within the political economy of knowledge, the increased access to scientific information has not reduced the demand for it. Instead, the political competition for science has created an inflationary pressure on the legitimizing capacity of scientific experts (Weingart 2002: p. 173). The public demand for science has not been satisfied by the modern expansion in the production and dissemination of knowledge, because this demand is driven by a desire for certainty that science cannot satisfy. Despite this inability of experts to satisfy this public demand for certainty, the authoritative relationship remains in place. The reason for this, Weingart argues, is that there are no viable alternatives: “there is no other system of more reliable knowledge and consequently none providing higher legitimacy for political decisions” (ibid: p. 174). Thus, in modern knowledge society, science remains the authoritative source of knowledge in the public realm. However, expert authority has come under pressure, in the sense that expertise is now widely perceived as “uncertain, risky, and incomplete” (Maassen & Weingart 2005: p. 3). The recursive coupling of science with politics means that experts can no longer speak from a position of external authority. They remain in authority but have lost some of their former capacity to adjudicate between competing views and resolve public debates.

This review of the sociological literature on modern knowledge society and its discontents provides the empirical backstory that informs my understanding of the contemporary crisis of expertise. According to this story, the crisis is not a manifestation of a shift in public attitudes. People have not “had enough of experts,” as the British politician Michael Gove suggested during the Brexit campaign. Nor does the crisis originate from public ignorance or scientific illiteracy, or from any potentially corrupting tendency within the academic community. Instead, the crisis is better understood as a crisis-reaction to the modern transformation of the relationship between politics and knowledge.

The evolution of modern knowledge society has radically transformed the social relationship between politics and knowledge. This transformation has
changed the rules of the political game. In a societal context where almost all issues of common concern can be studied and discussed scientifically, politicians have little choice but to appeal to scientific expertise (Limoges 1993: p. 417). In pursuing their political aims, political actors must try to convince their audiences that their policy proposals are supported by scientific knowledge, meaning that they are “evidence-based.” Politicians, therefore, operate under pressure to take part in the political competition for science. They are incentivized to appropriate the name of science for their own worldviews, and hence to bring science into the party-political struggle for power.

The modern transformation has also changed the role of scientific experts, who now find themselves confronted with new public demands for transparency and accountability. When science is turned into a salient political currency, it is no longer possible for the experts to operate at a peaceful distance from the political struggle – at least not if their field of knowledge happens to be politically significant. Thus, in the contemporary public realm, they find themselves being pulled, whether intentionally or unintentionally, into the center of the political arena.

The contemporary crisis of expertise can be understood as reflecting the unfulfilled promise of modern knowledge society. The tremendous growth of scientific knowledge in late modernity has not been translated into the expected certainty. Instead, the desire for certainty drives the ever-closer coupling of science and politics, which only further reduces the legitimating capacity of expertise. This dynamic is not the result of an “assault on science”; rather, it is integral to knowledge society itself. The expertization of politics and the politicization of science have been studied by social scientists for decades. Both processes have also been discussed in normative terms by theorists who worry about their implications for democracy (see, e.g., Habermas 1971 for a critique of ‘the technocratic consciousness’ brought by expertization, and Pettit 2004 for a critique of politicization). In this thesis, however, I wish to highlight another aspect of the modern transformation, which has hitherto received less attention in the academic literature: the change that knowledge society has brought to the role of citizens.

In contemporary society, citizens have access to an unprecedented amount of expertise, which offers to guide them through their attempts to navigate the decisions of life and politics. However, even though expertise abounds in the contemporary public realm, its ability to alleviate uncertainty has become significantly reduced. The political competition for science means that experts have lost some of their former capacity to bring public debates about knowledge to determined conclusions. This also implies that citizens can no longer safely fall back on expert authority. Citizens can no longer take “the expert view” for granted. Instead, they are now under pressure to make up their own minds on how to judge the various and often competing knowledge claims that circulate in the public realm. In modern knowledge society, thus, the residual uncertainty has become privatized: it is now the responsibility of
individual citizens, who must sort through a maze of competing claims to scientific knowledge. In other words, in this society, the burden of judgment falls heavily on the shoulders of non-expert citizens, who are now under pressure to develop an expertise of their own – to become “experts on experts.”

Expertise in Democratic Theory

Traditionally, the main trend in democratic theory has been to discuss expertise as a potential threat to democracy. For some, the very idea of a “democratic theory of expertise” may even seem like a contradiction in terms. The word ‘democracy’ invokes the notion of a government by opinion, a regime where citizens interact with each other as political equals. The word ‘expertise’ brings forth an altogether different set of associations. Expertise is “the knowledge of the few” – it is meritocratic and unequally distributed. Equality is the lifeblood of democracy. Expertise, by contrast, is hierarchical per definition. Thus, democracy and expertise have often been regarded as concepts that belong to two separate realms (see Weber 1919/2009). Democracy belongs to the realm of politics and expertise belongs to the realm of science. These two realms of human activity are governed by different goals that must be carefully separated. In politics, the goal is to peacefully accommodate a plurality of opinions and ways of life. In science, the goal is to advance the quest for a singular, objective truth. What I will describe as ‘the conventional view’ therefore holds that expertise and democracy are governed by different ideals, hence providing different standards of judgment. For example, whereas political disagreement is natural and expected, disagreement among experts is perceived as the failure of science to attain its goal – that is, to identify the truth. According to this view, politics should be as democratic as possible. Expertise, by contrast, should not be democratic: it should be scientific.

As Alfred Moore (2021) observes, the question of how to understand the role of experts in democracy has been obscured by the conventional framing of democracy as a highly stylized “rule by the people,” which is positioned against an equally stylized epistocracy, a “rule by knowers” modeled on Plato’s (in)famous argument for a republic governed by philosopher kings. The central issue for democratic theorists has been about normative justification. Why should we favor a democratic system of government over a government of knowers, i.e., a rule by experts? This classic debate has been theoretically productive in that it has pushed us to reflect more deeply on the value of democracy. In simple (and somewhat simplified) terms, the debate can be described as a clash between epistemic democrats, who argue that democracy can be justified, at least in part, by virtue of its knowledge-producing capacity (see, e.g., List & Goodin 2001; Estlund 2008; Landemore 2013), and proceduralists, who argue that democracy is justified in virtue of its procedural qualities, and that the value of the democratic process is therefore independent of the political outcomes that it generates (see e.g., Dahl 1989; Saffon & Urbinati
Both sides, however, try to explain why democracy ought to be preferred over rule by experts. The tension between democracy and expertise not only shapes the debate about the justification of democracy but also informs a perennial elitist critique of democratic theory. According to these critics (see Brennan 2016; Lippmann 1922; 1925; Schumpeter 1942; Achen & Bartels 2016), democratic theorists tend to assume a romanticized notion of democracy as a regime where “the people” participate directly in governing themselves. This conception of democracy, they argue, not only assumes an unrealistic notion of democratic publics as capable of uniting behind a common will, but it also ignores the cognitive limitations of human beings, and the fact that ordinary people lack the specialized knowledge that is needed to make informed decisions. According to some of these critics, democracy itself is invariably in tension with the ideal of competent government (see Brennan 2016).

The normative debate on the justification of democracy remains productive. However, as Moore (2021) warns, we should not let the distinction between democracy and epistocracy blind us to the separate question of how to understand the role of experts in democracy. “Whether the concern is about experts having too little influence in democratic politics or too much, there remains a tendency to invoke a straw man in the form of an imagined system of pure and unmixed expert rule” (2021: p. 554). Such ‘straw men’ are of little help in enhancing our normative understanding of expertise in democracy, nor will they help us better understand the contemporary crisis of expertise and the democratic problem it raises.

Few political theorists have specifically addressed the question of how to understand the role of scientific expertise in democracy. From a historical perspective, this neglect seems truly puzzling. As Stephen Turner (2003) observes, the evolution of modern science and technology and the institutionalization of modern representative democracy stand out as the two revolutionary developments of the 20th century (pp. 1-3). These developments have unfolded in parallel with one another, and each represents a defining feature of the modern world. So why have political theorists not taken a greater interest in the normative relationship between the two? The answer, Turner suggests, is that scientific expertise has generally been perceived as a technical matter of little political relevance. Its functional significance for modern democracy is, of course, undeniable: without modern science and technology, a large-scale democratic system would be practically unfeasible. Yet, its relevance for political theory could still be close to nil: “It must be conceded that governments have a need for technical knowledge just as government buildings have a need for plumbing. But no-one imagines that political theory has failed or is somehow inadequate for failing to recognize the significance of plumbing” (pp. 3-4). If expertise is comparable to plumbing, in the sense that it serves a purely functional role in democratic politics, then the question might be too trivial to
merit serious academic consideration. If the value of expertise is strictly functional, then we already know the answer: its role is simply to be “on tap, but not on top,” as the old saying goes.

The conventional view of expertise in democracy, which regards expertise as serving a purely functional role, continues to shape much of the contemporary debate on expertise and democratic politics. If we assume that the value of expertise in democracy is functional, then it becomes irrelevant to discuss its role in democratic politics. Instead, the question that needs to be addressed is one of demarcation: how to define the criteria by which to demarcate the realm of politics from the realm of science. In response to this problem, Max Weber (1919/2009: 5) suggests that the solution can be found in the fact/value distinction. On the other hand, Don K. Price (1965) proposes that the boundary is better conceived as encompassing a spectrum ranging from truth to power. More recently, Thomas Christiano (2012) has suggested that the epistemic division of labor should be organized along the means-ends distinction. In a democracy, he asserts, citizens should be in charge of the ends of society, while the experts should decide on the means by which these ends can be best achieved. This arrangement, Christiano suggests, is “compatible with the idea that citizens are essentially in the driver’s seat with regard to the society and equals in the process of driving the society” (p. 33), while still allowing a role for experts to ensure the “truth sensitivity” of the political process (p. 36). “The basic process of [expert] influence has to be essentially a kind of filter that separates out theories that have some substantial support within the expert community from those that do not” (ibid). By filtering out the theories that lack substantial support within the scientific community, experts can enhance the epistemic quality of the democratic process, while still permitting “a wide variety of theoretical approaches to be used by politicians and ordinary citizens” (ibid).

However, in recent decades, the conventional view of the relationship between politics and science has been called into question. In particular, the assumption that the realm of science can be neatly demarcated from the realm of science by way of analytical criteria is challenged by a growing body of empirical and theoretical research within Science and Technology Studies (STS). STS is an interdisciplinary field of research that studies the interactions between science, technology, and society, and it has emerged in parallel with the emergence of modern knowledge society. In the next section, I will examine three central arguments from STS and assess their relevance to democratic theory. The challenges posed by STS, I suggest, highlight the need for democratic theory to re-articulate the issue of expertise. Instead of conceiving it as a question of how to design institutional arrangements to ensure both truth sensitivity and popular control, what we have is essentially a boundary problem: in a democracy, how should we draw the distinction between politics and knowledge? This re-articulation of the issue further demonstrates the need for
democratic theorists to reflect more deeply on the normative relationship between politics and knowledge in modern democracy.

STS and the Problem of Expertise

Moore (2010) writes that “The technical is political could stand as a slogan for a critical aspiration shared by the varied research programs of science and technology studies (STS)” (p. 793). Indeed, this is a pithy summary of the overall contribution of this research discipline. However, it also immediately invites the further question of what it means, more specifically, for “the technical” to be “political.” Let us therefore take a closer look at three critical claims advanced by STS scholars and how they challenge the conventional view of science as an essentially apolitical enterprise.

First, STS scholars have challenged the conception of science as universal knowledge. In this context, universalism denotes the notion of science as a quest for knowledge governed by universal norms and procedures, which means, in turn, that its results have universal applicability. This universalist conception of science is challenged by STS scholars, who aim to highlight the contingency and cultural variances of different epistemic contexts. In other words, according to these scholars, neither the production nor the uptake of scientific knowledge can be assessed exclusively as a matter of how well society can live up to a unitary scientific ideal. Rather, scientific practices and the public uptake of their outcomes are invariably contingent on the surrounding socio-political culture.

One example of this critique against the conventional notion of science as universal knowledge can be found in Sheila Jasanoff’s (2005) comparative study of the politics of life science. In this seminal work, Jasanoff addresses the puzzle of why the same scientific facts have elicited such varying policy responses, even in countries that can all be described as “progressive, rational, Enlightenment societies” (p. 270). She argues that the plurality of regulatory regimes cannot be explained either as the result of public ignorance or as an expression of cultural differences in values. The scientific and technological advancement of genetic engineering has been met with different policy responses in Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. However, according to Jasanoff, this does not mean that the Brits are more ignorant than the Germans, or that Americans care less about food safety than Europeans. Instead, she suggests that the variation in policy reflects corresponding cultural differences in public expectations on how scientific knowledge ought to be produced, tested, and related to policy. The societal uptake of scientific knowledge is not determined
by the public’s understanding of science but interacts with the ‘civic epistemology’ that permeates the context of its production and application (ch. 10).

Jasanoff’s point is not to dispute the universal desirability of reliable and objective knowledge. Rather, her argument is that the institutions, methods, and procedures that are set up to generate such knowledge are not simply embodiments of a universal ideal but constructions shaped by the socio-political culture in which they are embedded. Just as different systems of democratic government have different institutions, methods, and procedures for securing political accountability, different knowledge societies employ different ways to ensure objectivity in the production and application of science.

Secondly, STS scholars have also challenged the conventional conception of science as a value-neutral enterprise. According to the conventional view, science and politics are governed by distinct goals. Politics is the enterprise where actors seek to change the world, to make it “better” according to their own conception of the good. The goal of science, however, is to advance the quest for objective knowledge. Scientists should not attempt to change the world according to their own ideals, and they must not allow their political or moral convictions to influence their conclusions. This view therefore holds that scientists, when deciding on scientific matters such as data quality, methodology, or what conclusions to draw from their results, must base their judgments exclusively on epistemic considerations. Only epistemic values have a legitimate role in science.

The value-neutral ideal in science has been contested both by philosophers of science such as Heather Douglas (2000; 2005) and STS scholars such as the aforementioned Sheila Jasanoff (2015). As Douglas points out, the value-neutral ideal “is based on the assumption of scientific isolationism, i.e., that scientists operate in an enclave that is largely separate from society at large, taking in resources from society and, when scientific consensus is achieved, revealing answers to society” (2005: p. 155). This notion of science, she contends, is untenable, given the increasing societal significance of science and technology in late modernity (ibid). In the contemporary world, science not only tells us about the world as it is – it has also become consequential to a

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5 The belief that ignorance or lack of scientific literacy is the main obstacle to the societal acceptance of science has been paradigmatic in discussions about public understanding of science. However, this belief has been criticized by STS scholars such as Brian Wynne (1992; 1995), who argue that this explanatory model fails to consider how the public reception of knowledge interacts with agency and social identity. For example, in his much-cited case study of the relationship between scientific experts and Cumbrian sheep farmers in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, Wynne (1992) finds that the resistance among the farmers against the experts’ recommendations could not be construed as ignorance or a unilateral failure to understand the science. In fact, the farmers had relevant local knowledge that the experts failed to take into account in their models. According to Wynne, the case offers an illustration of how agency and social identities interact with the public uptake of science. In this case, the inability of the sheep farmers to trust and respect the authority of the experts was not a product of ignorance but arose from their experience of powerlessness, which was partly due to the lack of reflexivity on the part of the experts.
much greater extent than before. Moreover, scientific results are not infallible. Uncertainties always remain, which means that there is always a risk that the scientist could accept an incorrect hypothesis or discard theories or claims that are, in fact, true. Douglas suggests that the value-neutral ideal for science is inadequate given the uncertainty and practical judgment involved in scientific knowledge production, combined with the authoritative position of scientific experts in modern society (2000). The normative argument she advances is that scientists have a moral obligation to consider possible societal consequences of their errors. In order to strike the proper balance between the risk of false positives and false negatives, scientists must take the possible consequences of such errors into account – for instance, they must take into account the societal impact of under-regulation versus over-regulation (p. 568).

In an article discussing the role of science in the legal system, Jasanoff (2015) presents a similar thesis. She emphasizes the normative significance of context. When scientists operate in a non-academic context – for example, when they are called to testify in a court of justice – we must shift our normative and analytical attention “from science in action to science for action” (p. 1727). The first approach (“science in action”) considers how science can best achieve its own ends, that is, how it can best promote the production of reliable and objective knowledge – the second (“science for action”) considers how it can best be used to meet the goals of the system that it is called upon to serve – such as those of the legal system (pp. 1725-1728). If we understand science in the legal realm as an example of “science for action,” the primary question is no longer how scientists can best serve their own ideals of objectivity and reliability, but how their methods and results can best serve the goals of the court, i.e., the public administration of justice. The context of application thus has normative implications for our understanding of what science should be. When scientific practices and results are applied outside their own realm, we should replace the conventional notion of scientific truths with a more normative concept of “serviceable truths” (p. 1730; see also Jasanoff 1990). This concept highlights the specific expectations we have of scientists in their public advisory role. When science operates in the legal system, therefore, its role “is not simply, even preeminently, to provide a mirror of nature,” but rather, “to be of service to those who come to the law with justice or welfare claims whose resolution happens to call for scientific fact-finding” (p. 1730).

Jasanoff’s concept of serviceable truths corresponds with Douglas’s argument that scientists have an obligation to consider the possible societal consequences of their errors. What they both argue is essentially that the quality of scientific expertise cannot properly be assessed only on epistemic grounds because the level of acceptable uncertainty and the time frame of decision-making depend on the context of its application. The accepted level of uncertainty – epistemic and societal – must be adjusted in relation to the goal that science is called upon to serve.
Finally, the third argument from STS challenges the notion of science as an *essence*, which means that its identity is determined by its inherent qualities. The problem of demarcation – that is, the problem of how to distinguish scientific claims from non-scientific ones – is a classic issue in the philosophy of science. One influential solution to this problem is the one proposed by Karl Popper (1959), who famously argued that science can be distinguished from non-science by the criterion of falsification. According to Popper, the difference between scientific and non-scientific theories does not lie in their level of empirical verification but in their falsifiability: a theory is scientific only if it is possible to prove it wrong. Popper’s argument is simple and powerful – however, upon closer examination, the falsification criterion also appears insufficient to determine the proper identity of science. As argued by the sociologist of science Harry Collins (1985; 1994), scientific facts can only be generated by reliable instruments, but reliable instruments can only be recognized as such if they are able to generate reliable facts. There is no analytical yardstick that allows us to determine when an empirical claim has been sufficiently replicated and corroborated, or which can tell us how to distinguish empirical observations that indeed prove a theory wrong from observations that are better discarded as mistakes due to human error or technical failure. The demarcation problem therefore appears to generate a paradox, which Collins describes as “experimenter’s regress”: an endless loop of co-dependence between theory and evidence.

According to Thomas Gieryn (1983, 2001), however, there is a way out of this conundrum. The solution, he suggests, is to redefine the problem at hand. Instead of perceiving the distinction between science and non-science as a purely philosophical issue, we must understand it as the contingent and tentative outcome of *boundary work*. What Gieryn suggests is therefore that the identity of science, and its demarcation from non-science, cannot be determined philosophically but is better perceived as the outcome of a historical process of negotiation and identity-formation. Science, thus understood, is not an ”essence” but a tentatively defined space, where the boundaries are continuously redefined, negotiated, and contested, both from within and from without (2001: pp. 404-406). The problem of how to distinguish science from non-science, Gieryn argues, is not just a philosophical problem but a matter of practical judgment. As such, demarcation is an issue that routinely demands the attention of scientists, educators, administrators, and others who perform boundary work on a day-to-day basis:

Even as sociologists and philosophers argue over the uniqueness of science among intellectual activities, demarcation is routinely accomplished in practical, everyday settings: education administrators set up curricula that include chemistry but exclude alchemy; the National Science Foundation adopts standards to assure that some physicists but no psychics get funded; journal editors reject some manuscripts as unscientific […]. Demarcation is not just an *analytical* problem: because of
considerable material opportunities and professional advantages available only to “scientists”, it is no mere academic matter to decide who is doing science and who is not (Gieryn 1983: p. 781, italics in original).

The identity of science cannot be understood exclusively as a philosophical matter because the “cartography” of science is consequential: it pertains to interests as well as beliefs (Gieryn: 2001: pp. 404-407). Membership in the scientific community comes with both privileges and responsibilities, and decisions about who and what to include or exclude have implications for its public authority. The historical shifts in the cartography of science not only reflect a history of philosophical progress but also negotiations and ideological struggles over the identity of science and its relationship to other domains. The boundary between science and non-science is shaped (and re-shaped) through scientists’ attempts to maintain or expand their societal authority, accept or avoid responsibility, and clarify and cultivate the meaning of their trade in relation to other realms of human activity, such as politics.

Taken together, these three arguments from STS do indeed suggest that scientific expertise is more “political” than conventionally assumed. However, this does not imply that science ought to be made into an object of party-political contestation, nor does it give us reason to question the value of scientific research and academic freedom. Rather, it implies that the nature and identity of science cannot be taken for granted. Overall, the significance of STS lies in its recognition of science as a human achievement (Edge 2001: p. 5).

The findings and arguments from STS have not only demystified scientific knowledge production but also inspired calls for a “democratization of science.” The idea behind such calls is that the democratic legitimacy of scientific arrangements must somehow be improved by, for example, promoting transparency, institutionalizing new mechanisms for holding experts accountable, or engaging non-expert citizens in decisions about scientific funding, making them part of a process of “extended peer review” (Funtowicz & Ravetz 1993; Guston 2004). The assumption that underlies such calls for democratization appears to be that STS has exposed a democratic deficit in the ways in which modern democratic societies have organized the epistemic division of labor. Thus understood, the challenge from STS highlights the need for the scientific community to produce knowledge that is not only reliable and objective in a scientific sense, but also legitimate and “socially robust” (see Nowotny, Gibbons & Scott 2001).

However, I suggest that the challenge from STS is better interpreted as theoretical rather than political. The STS critique against the conventional view of science as a universal, value-neutral, and essential enterprise does not automatically mean that our existing institutional arrangements must now be reformed in the name of democracy. This critique does not necessarily carry political implications, such as the need to change our existing institutions for
scientific policy advice or to invent new, complementary institutions that can accommodate alternative forms of public participation. Instead, the insights from STS, I suggest, pose a challenge to our theoretical understanding of democracy. More specifically, it challenges the conventional view of the relationship between science and democratic politics as one between two mutually independent realms of human activity. What is needed in response to this challenge is not a democratization of science but a new democratic theory that can make sense of the normative relationship between knowledge and politics. Such a theory must acknowledge that this relationship is more complex than traditionally assumed – that it is simply not enough to contend that scientific experts should be “on tap, not on top,” that they should be “servants, not masters,” or for that matter, that they should “fix the car” but allow citizens to remain “in the driver’s seat of society” (cf. Christiano 2012).

The lesson to be learned from STS is that science cannot be understood as apolitical or unaffected by the surrounding socio-political culture. From the perspective of STS, science is an achievement enabled by a legitimate political process – and the legitimacy of the political process depends, in turn, on its respect for objective knowledge. Put differently, objective knowledge now appears as both the outcome and the precondition for a legitimate political process. Alternatively, as Jasanoff (2004) describes it, the scientific ordering of knowledge and the political ordering of society are “co-produced, each underwriting the other’s existence” (p. 17, italics in original). The implication is that the normative question cannot simply be understood as a matter of how to organize the epistemic division of labor between experts and non-expert citizens. Instead, the problem that confronts us is essentially one about boundaries. In a democracy, how should we draw the boundary between politics and knowledge? This re-articulation of the problem aligns with my claim at the beginning of this chapter: that the contemporary crisis of expertise is not only a crisis for knowledge or rational government but also a crisis for democracy. What it highlights is the need for democratic theorists to address the normative relationship between knowledge and politics in the democratic public realm.

The Concept of Expertise

In the introduction, I briefly explained what I mean by ‘expertise.’ Let me now return to this concept and elaborate a bit more on its meaning and the conceptualization used in this dissertation.

In this thesis, I will understand expertise as ‘public knowledge.’ Under this conceptualization, the experts serve as our public representatives of knowledge in a dual sense: they have publicly accredited knowledge, and they participate in a public context, where they relate their knowledge to common issues. Thus, the experts that I refer to are members of the scientific community – they are people with university credentials (such as a doctorate) who teach and do research in specific fields of study. However, the experts are not
only scientists and academics but also public figures. Scientists and scholars are no experts when they write academic articles or give lectures at their universities. They assume an expert role only when they leave the academic realm to participate in the debates and decision-making processes that take place in the public realm. Thus, what I will focus on is the notion of expertise as a specific public role or activity, rather than expertise as a specific kind of knowledge (cf. Goldman 2001). Note, however, that my ambition is not to propose a universally valid or correct definition of expertise. The conceptualization used in this dissertation is simply one that is instrumental for my purposes and corresponds with one of several meanings that can be assigned to the word.

The word ‘expert’/‘expertise’ originally derives from the Latin ‘experior,’ which means “make trial of, put to the test, experience, find; attempt” (Morrow 2005). It shares its etymological roots with ‘experiment’ and ‘experience.’ When the word first appeared in Europe in the 19th century, it was used in the legal context to describe a specific category of witnesses. An expert witness was someone “who by virtue of special acquired knowledge or experience on a subject, presumably not within the knowledge of men generally, may testify in a court of justice to matters of opinion thereon, as distinguished from ordinary witnesses, who can in general testify only to facts” (Whitney 1899). According to Gil Eyal (2019), the concept of expertise originates from France, where it referred to the experts who were consulted by commercial courts to settle disputes between British merchants and French customs authorities. In this context, *une expertise* – which in English meant something like an “appraisal” or “evaluation” – referred to the assessments made by local merchants and manufacturers to determine the origin, quality, and value of imported goods, an assessment which then informed the judgment of the court (p. 12). The first experts were thus merchants who were called to testify in court about the quality of the goods of their foreign competitors – a practice that would hardly meet our contemporary expectations of what an expert witness should be (that is, an impartial, neutral, and disinterested source of knowledge). Nevertheless, this historical glance at the original concept of expertise is valuable, as it calls our attention to three dimensions that tend to be overlooked in contemporary discussions about expertise.

First, the original concept highlights the *practical* dimension of expertise. Originally, expertise was understood as an activity or a social role. The expert was someone who *made* an expert assessment, and/or someone who was called to testify in court as an expert witness. This emphasis on expertise as a practice and a social role is less prevalent in contemporary debates about expertise, where the focus is typically on the knowledge, skills, training, or experience that one needs to be a qualified expert. In other words, in contemporary discourse, expertise is often understood as something that one can possess. This notion of expertise is not wrong or incorrect; however, it has the
effect of obscuring questions about how to understand expertise as a practice that not only involves abstract knowledge but also judgment and decision.

Secondly, the original meaning of expertise also highlights the *relational* dimension of expertise. Expertise, as it was originally understood, was an assessment that was made at the request of a client. It was not “knowledge for the sake of knowledge” but a knowledgeable assessment that was made to assist the goals of another institution, such as a court. The original concept of expertise therefore highlights the relationship between experts and non-experts that is implied in the very concept of expertise. It makes little sense to speak of expertise where everyone is an expert. Thus, the expert is not just someone who pursues knowledge for its own sake but someone who uses their knowledge to serve a goal beyond finding the truth – for example, to assist the legal administration of justice. This relational dimension of expertise pinpoints the distinction between science and expertise. Scientists operate in relation to the community of other scientists, their peers. Scientific experts, in contrast, not only relate to the scientific community but also operate in relation to a broader community of non-experts, who have an interest in the issue under consideration.

Finally, the original concept highlights the *indeterminacy* of expertise. Expertise has often been understood as a source of certainty. The expert is someone who can give us “the facts,” or, as Alvin Goldman’s (2001) influential definition holds – the experts are people who hold more true beliefs within a specific domain of knowledge than people on average. According to the definition provided by the Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia from 1899, however, expertise is a practice that involves going beyond the facts – that is, beyond what can be known for certain. In the legal context, what distinguished the expert from an ordinary witness was exactly that the former was entitled to give testimony that went beyond the facts of the matter. Ordinary witnesses could only be relied upon to testify to “the facts,” i.e., their memory of the course of an event. In contrast, the experts were people who, by virtue of their knowledge and experience, could be relied upon to testify to their expert opinion, which was then deemed sufficiently reliable to hold up as evidence in a court of law (Whitney 1899). The original concept of expertise therefore highlights the indeterminacy of expertise: that it is not only about information but about judgment. What the experts bring to public life is not just facts but opinions, predictions, assessments, and advice. As such, expertise is not a source

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6 The relational quality of expertise is also stressed by the sociologist Reiner Grundmann (2017). According to him, “expertise is essentially something delivered at the request of someone else who wants it” (p. 26). Expert knowledge is not knowledge pure and simple, but knowledge that serves a goal defined by a client or recipient. “This makes expertise relational in a dual sense: it relates to clients and it relates to their needs, which often is the need for guidance in decision-making” (ibid; see also Stehr & Grundmann 2011: ch. 3).
of certainty but is better understood as a way of managing uncertainties that ultimately cannot be dissolved.

The experts in focus in this dissertation are not professionals (e.g., doctors or lawyers), or bureaucrats and civil servants (e.g., government officials or other employees in the public sector), but scholars and scientists who operate in a non-academic context. Moreover, my focus here is on experts who operate in the public realm, rather than those who participate in the legal context as expert witnesses or who are consulted by private companies or organizations. As I conceptualize it, expertise is a form of scientific or scholarly “testimony” that serves to illuminate issues of public concern. In the legal realm, such testimonies are provided to enlighten the judgment of the court, which must make up its judgment based on an account of the past. In the public realm, expert testimonies are made to enlighten the judgment of the public, i.e., to assist citizens and policymakers, who must make up their judgment about a future course of action. In other words, in the legal context, the question that must be answered is essentially about the past: “What happened?” In the public realm, in contrast, the experts are called upon to assist citizens and policymakers in their attempts to navigate an uncertain future. In the public realm, the questions of greatest interest are those that are concerned with the future and the alternatives of the present: “What will happen?” and “What should be done?” Thus, the issues that call for judgment in the public realm are not ultimately about truth or justice but about action and decision.

Democracy and the Public Realm

Democracy is the other central concept of this dissertation. The overarching aim of this thesis is to articulate a new democratic theory of expertise. But democratic in what sense? Democracy is sometimes understood as the set of institutions needed to transform popular will into policy. Thus understood, democracy could be seen as a system of government that encompasses certain rights and procedures, for example, general and equal suffrage, free and regular elections, political rights such as freedom of association and demonstration, and potentially other institutional mechanisms that are needed to ensure the representativeness and accountability of political leadership, such as a free and independent press. In this thesis, however, my focus is not on the institutionalized process of democratic decision-making but on the informal process of opinion-formation, which takes place in the public realm.

In the liberal tradition of political thought, the public realm is sometimes described metaphorically as “the marketplace of ideas” (see, e.g., Gaus 2003). This metaphor invokes the image of an arena where individuals can freely express, exchange, and test their political views in an open competition of ideas. This notion of the public realm is closely associated with the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and his liberal-utilitarian argument in defense of free speech. Mill advocated that individuals should be allowed
extensive freedom to express their views and lead their lives according to their
own beliefs because it is only through the free and open competition of ideas
and lifestyles that we can ever hope to discover the truths of life and politics
(1859/2012: ch. 2). According to this perspective, individual liberty is what
enables the public realm to function as an engine for political, moral, and cul-
tural progress. Censorship and other restrictions on individual freedom are,
therefore, wrong not only because they harm the well-being of the individuals
who are immediately affected but also because they impede human progress
as a whole (ibid: p. 33).

However, the public realm is not only a central concept in liberal political
thought; it is also central to democracy. As Hans Kelsen (1945/1999) asserts,
“[a] democracy without public opinion is a contradiction in terms” (p. 288).
Some of the rights that are sometimes described as “liberal” – such as freedom
of speech and the freedom of the press – should therefore be understood as
integral to democracy, not just “liberal democracy.” This is because, as Kelsen
further argues, freedom of opinion is not only an individual right but also con-
stitutive of the democratic process. “Insofar as public opinion can arise only
where intellectual freedom, freedom of speech, press, and religion, are guar-
anteed, democracy coincides with political – though not necessarily economic
– liberalism” (ibid). The public realm is not only an arena where individuals
can exert their freedom of expression; it is also the arena where public opinion
is formed. The public realm can therefore be conceived as the production site
of legitimate political power.

However, the power that arises from public opinion-formation must be dis-
tinguished from electoral power. This point is stressed by Nadia Urbinati
(2014), who asserts that public opinion is defined by its indeterminacy. Unlike
electoral mandate, public opinion is “not translatable into the law directly and
not endowed with the signs of command” (Urbinati 2014: p. 22). The power
of public opinion is not quantifiable or easily measured, and it cannot be dis-
tributed according to any principle resembling that of “one person, one vote.”
Nor would that be desirable, because public opinion is not a unified entity but
“a plural space that is composed of several kinds of opinions” (p. 40). Public
opinion differs both from the opinion of any individual and the majority view:
it is a space that encompasses diversity and disagreement.

Despite its indeterminate and pluralistic character, public opinion is never-
theless a source of power that democratic governments cannot ignore. Demo-
cracy is not synonymous with the majority principle or with counting heads.
Rather, the counting of heads is an important mechanism by which democracy
– understood as “government by opinion” – can be realized. Without a public
realm where citizens can interact and exert their freedom of opinion, majori-
tarian institutions would be deprived of their basis of power. The public realm,
therefore, is distinct from but invariably connected with the democratic state:
it is the “buffer zone” (Urbinati 2014: p. 24) that establishes a distance be-
tween the citizenry and its government, but it is also the “sphere which mediates between society and the state” (Habermas 1974: p. 50) and hence the link that sustains the connection between the two.

The notion of the public realm as essential to democracy is ignored or denied by theorists who advance a minimalist, electoral conception of democracy, i.e., who understand it as simply a “method,” an institutionalized competition for political leadership (see Schumpeter 1942; Lippmann 1922; 1925). According to the advocates of such minimalist conceptions of democracy, the very idea of ‘public opinion’ is nonsensical. Public opinion means nothing, they insist, because the public is a mere abstraction, a “phantom” (Lippmann 1925). However, this denial of the public is not a view that is widely shared among democratic theorists. Democracy’s need for a public realm is acknowledged by political theorists of various stripes, including, among others, liberal democrats such as John Rawls, deliberative democrats such as Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, and radical or agonistic democrats such as Chantal Mouffe.

A broad and elementary definition of the public realm could be that it is the realm that “constitutes a shared relationship between rulers and ruled which makes politics more than mere power or domination” (O’Sullivan 2009: p. 117). The concept of the public realm is thus connected with the idea that democratic politics is distinct from sheer force, and that democratic governments cannot rely exclusively on coercion to ensure compliance with state directives – that they must, in some sense, rely on the consent of the governed. Put differently, the democratic concept of the public realm is deeply connected with the notion of political legitimacy (ibid). The public realm has a legitimating role in that it accommodates the procedures and/or practices that can bestow legitimacy on democratic decisions. Whereas elections and parliamentary procedures enable democracy as majority rule, the public realm enables democracy to be something other than a manifestation of the sheer force of the majority. But it hardly needs to be said that there is no consensus in the democratic theory literature as to how the public realm ought to be understood, or how it ought to be constituted to properly serve its legitimating role in democracy. The question of how to understand the democratic public realm is one of the major sources of disagreement that divides liberal democrats, deliberative democrats, radical democrats, republicans, and others.

The democratic concept of the public realm should be distinguished from its liberal equivalent. In liberal thought, the public realm is understood as an arena for individual liberty. It is the space where individuals can exert their freedom to speak their minds and interact openly with the views of others. In democratic theory, the public realm is understood as the site where (legitimate) political power is produced. It is the space that connects democratic publics with their states, and the space where individuals can assume a role as citizens. By making this distinction between the liberal and the democratic
concept of the public realm, we can distinguish between the liberal and democratic problems that may arise in relation to it. Political liberalism helps us identify the problem for individual liberty that arises when the public realm comes under the dominance of either the state or the popular majority. This is the problem that Mill addresses in his classic work *On Liberty* from 1859. The democratic problem must be understood somewhat differently. A democratic problem exists when public opinion is subject to manipulation in some form so that the public realm is deprived of its legitimating power and becomes instead a tool of domination. For example, the state can exert this form of oppression through the dissemination of state-controlled propaganda. Other actors, including non-state organizations and foreign states, can also engage in such manipulation of public opinion. In simple terms, when the public realm is approached as a democratic concept, the value in focus is not individual liberty but the political freedom of opinion.

In this thesis, I will assume a general definition of democracy as “government by opinion.” This means democracy is a political system of government involving not only an institutionalized process of decision-making (realized by institutions such as equal suffrage and general and regular elections) but also a public realm that accommodates the process of opinion-formation. This definition is broad enough to be compatible with various positions in democratic theory. However, it excludes minimalist, Schumpetarian conceptions that espouse a narrow understanding of democracy as electoral competition.

The question that I seek to answer in this thesis is how to understand the role of experts in the democratic public realm. In seeking a response to this question, I will critically examine different theoretical perspectives on public opinion and its legitimating role in democratic politics. At the end of my inquiry, I hope to be able to say something more specific and precise about the meaning of democratic opinion-formation. For now, however, let me end by restating the research problem that this dissertation will address: how should we understand the role of experts in supporting democratic opinion-formation, given the vulnerabilities of the public realm? This problem formulation relies on the following set of assumptions: (1) the public realm is an informal yet essential democratic institution; (2) public opinion is the source of legitimate power, and (3) experts play a role not only in the administration of democratic decisions but also in supporting democratic opinion-formation.

**Methodological Approach**

With this dissertation, I aim to make a contribution to normative democratic theory. I will do so by critically examining the currently predominant normative approaches to expertise in democracy, and by developing a new approach inspired by Arendt’s political thought. In this endeavor, I will use three theoretical methods: interpretation, conceptual analysis, and normative argumentation.
First, *interpretation* is the activity where one explains the meaning of a text, an argument, a theory, or some empirical phenomenon or development. I have already applied this method in my discussion of the contemporary crisis of expertise. Building on existing sociological research, I have suggested that crisis should be interpreted as a crisis-reaction to the modern transformation of the relationship between politics and knowledge. This transformation has reduced the capacity of scientific experts to bring certainty and agreement to public debates about knowledge. My interpretation of the crisis as a crisis of expert authority follows the prior work of sociologists, such as Peter Weingart. However, I have also sought to emphasize an aspect of the modern transformation that has so far received less attention in the sociological literature on knowledge society: the added burden of judgment placed on citizens. The modern transformation has not only changed the role of science and politics, which must now operate under the logic of expertization and politicization. The reduced capacity of scientific experts to bring certainty and agreement to the public realm also assigns a new role to citizens, who are now under pressure to become “experts on experts.” In modern democracy, citizens are struggling to cope with the demands of this new role that knowledge society has assigned to them. Thus, from my interpretation, this is how we should understand the contemporary crisis: as illustrating the added burden of judgment in modern knowledge society.

My interpretation of the crisis of expertise is an attempt to make sense of an empirical development. However, most of the interpretative work that I undertake in this dissertation will be focused on making sense of texts. Textual interpretation is not a unitary methodological approach but is better perceived as a toolbox of various approaches and styles that can be combined in different ways. Methodological pluralism has increasingly become the norm, and few contemporary theorists are faithful to the doctrine of a single interpretative school. As Beckstein and Weber (2021) argue, we have good reasons to embrace this eclecticism: in fact, they suggest that any single approach is insufficient to properly extract the meaning of a text. Nevertheless, for the purpose of clarity, it is still beneficial to distinguish between different types of interpretation. I will therefore specify the ones that I will use the most.

The main material in this thesis is the collected works of Arendt, and my main object of study is her theoretical ideas and arguments. My interpretation of Arendt’s political thought will be oeuvre-based, rather than focused on specific texts (Beckstein & Weber 2021: p. 5). While some texts will be more important than others, my ambition is to make sense of Arendt’s ideas and arguments as she develops them in her entire body of work. I will therefore situate single texts in the context of her other texts – an approach that can be described as ‘textual contextualism’ (see Blau 2019). For example, my reading of *The Human Condition* (1958) will not be based exclusively on what Arendt writes in this specific book. Rather, I will interpret the arguments and
ideas that she develops there by also considering what she writes both in her earlier and later works.

A possible objection to textual contextualism is that it might lead the interpreter to gloss over tensions and contradictions that are in fact there, and that our interpretation could therefore present the philosophical content as more consistent and coherent than it really is. To some extent, such ‘adaptive reconstruction’ – where the interpreter “improves” the original text – is unavoidable (Blau 2017: p. 251). Given my intellectual aims, I would even say that such adaptations are necessary and beneficial. My reading of Arendt is not disinterested – that is, it is not motivated only by a general interest in her political thought. The reason why I turn to her scholarship is because I believe it can serve as a helpful source of inspiration for my own attempt to develop a new theoretical perspective on expertise in democracy. My interpretation of Arendt’s critique of modernity will therefore be a work of theoretical reconstruction. By unpacking her notion of ‘world alienation,’ I seek to reconstruct her understanding of the modern predicament. The goal of this reconstruction is to provide a clear and coherent notion of the democratic problem that lies at the heart of Arendt’s political thought – one that is clearer and more coherent than what we get from reading Arendt herself.

Adrian Blau (2017) suggests that an elementary distinction can be made between empirical, philosophical, and aesthetic textual interpretations. My approach in this dissertation will be philosophical, as I aim to make sense of the philosophical content of Arendt’s work. What I want to explain is the meaning of her ideas and arguments – not the personal intentions behind her books and essays, or my emotional responses when reading them. However, my approach is hermeneutical rather than strictly analytical (see Beckstein & Weber 2021: p. 4). This means that I will consider other aspects of the texts than just their propositional content. For example, I will take the historical context of Arendt’s political thought into account, and I will also pay attention to the metaphors and poetic aphorisms that she uses in her writings. We can better understand the meaning of a theory, argument, or concept by considering the context in which it is situated (see, e.g., Blau 2017; Lægaard 2021). In my view, both the historical and the aesthetic dimensions are relevant to understanding Arendt’s political thought, and we can only properly judge her theoretical ideas and arguments by taking these aspects of her work into account.

Finally, my approach will be contextualist also in the sense that I will relate my interpretation of Arendt to that of others: sometimes by building on prior work in the secondary literature, and sometimes by contesting interpretations that I find misguided. Here, I aim for transparency. I will try to make clear where and how my understanding deviates from the mainstream view and point to textual passages or other circumstances to support my reading of her work.

The second method that I will use is conceptual analysis. Concepts are the building blocks of theories, and conceptual analysis is thus the study of those...
building blocks (Olsthoorn 2017). In this thesis, I will use conceptual analysis to develop a new conceptual understanding of ‘expert authority’ and how it relates to ‘public judgment.’ In other words, I will construct the building blocks that I need to develop a new normative approach to expertise. To do so, I will draw on three of Arendt’s central concepts: authority, the public, and judgment.

I should stress that I have no ambition to write a conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte) of these concepts, and to trace their shifts in meaning over time (see Koselleck 2002). The type of conceptual analysis that I will engage in is much more limited: I will only analyze the Arendtian concepts. This analysis will be governed by my own theoretical purposes. Thus, whereas my examination of Arendt’s critique of modernity will be interpretative, my analysis of her three concepts is better understood as a creative appropriation (see Canovas 1983a). This means that I will take the parts of her thought that are most useful for my own purposes and use them to construct something new – a new understanding of expert authority and its relationship to public judgment. The primary goal, therefore, is not to make sense of Arendt’s political thought but to use elements of her work to create something new. Such creative appropriation is perfectly legitimate but requires transparency and active reflection on the distinction between the philosophical views that are expressed (explicitly or implicitly) in the material, and the ideas and arguments that we develop ourselves, by thinking with and beyond the work of others.

Finally, in this thesis, I will also use normative argumentation, which means that I will develop arguments about what ought (or ought not) to be. For the critical part of the thesis, I will use this method to reveal the limitations of the two predominant approaches to expertise in democracy (which I will call the ‘instrumental’ and the ‘procedural’ approach). By extracting and examining their implications, I will show that neither of them offers a sufficient conception of expertise in democracy. To make my argument convincing, I will try to represent these two approaches as favorably as possible to avoid the ‘straw man’ fallacy (for a discussion of different variants of this fallacy, see Aikin & Casey 2016). I will also use examples to illustrate how the two approaches fail to offer appropriate normative guidance in concrete situations, thereby clarifying the status of my critical argument.

In the final chapter, I will also use normative argumentation when I put the new approach together and extract its normative implications. Here, too, I will use examples for the purpose of illustration. The normative approach that I put forward in the final chapter is not intended to replace the two approaches discussed in the critical part of the dissertation. What I argue, however, is that it offers complementary normative guidance, and that it advances our normative reasoning about a democratic problem that the two existing approaches fail to address.
Thesis Outline

In this chapter, I have introduced the research problem addressed by this thesis and motivated why it is a problem that democratic theorists should address. I have also reviewed the sociological literature on modern knowledge society to make sense of the empirical claim that modern democracies are experiencing a crisis of expertise. To situate the theoretical gap, I have accounted for the conventional view of expertise in democratic theory and the challenge posed to it by STS. Finally, I have explained what I mean by ‘expertise’ and ‘democracy,’ the two main concepts of the thesis, and discussed my methodological approach. The rest of the dissertation is structured as follows.

In the next chapter (Chapter 2), I will review the existing normative approaches to expertise in democracy and examine them with a critical eye. The two approaches – the ‘instrumental’ and the ‘procedural’ – both emerge from the debate on public reason. This debate concerns the production of legitimate power in the public realm. The notion of public reason as the foundation of political legitimacy is a classic idea in the Western history of political thought, which originates from the philosophy of Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). The contemporary literature on public reason, however, can be described as a “post-Enlightenment project” (Gaus 2003). Following the American philosopher Gerald Gaus, I acknowledge that the theories that have become most influential in our time deviate in important respects from the classic conception of public reason (which Gaus refers to as “the Enlightenment view”). In response to the objections raised against the classic conception, theorists such as Rawls and Habermas have sought to develop new theories of public reason that better correspond with the conditions of the modern world. However, their theories still retain the fundamental core of the Enlightenment view: the belief in public reason as the universal foundation of political legitimacy.

In my review of the contemporary literature on public reason, I suggest that a distinction can be made between the two main theoretical conceptions, broadly defined as more instrumental and more procedural. As I will demonstrate, these two conceptions yield different implications for how to understand the role of experts in democracy – that is, they lead to two different normative approaches to expertise. In the final part of the chapter, I will subject the instrumental and the procedural approach to critical examination. The two approaches provide important insights into the normative relationship between knowledge and politics in the democratic public realm. Nonetheless, I will argue that they both also suffer from serious limitations. These limitations indicate the need to develop a new approach – one that not only considers the epistemic and rational but also the existential dimension of the relationship between knowledge and politics in modern democracy. The rest of the dissertation will be my attempt to develop an approach of this kind.
In Chapter 3, I will develop a new interpretation of the democratic problem reflected in the contemporary crisis of expertise by turning to Arendt’s critique of modernity. For Arendt, the modern age does not denote the beginning of enlightenment. Instead, she understands modernity as defined by a “loss of the world.” By unpacking Arendt’s notion of modern world alienation, I seek to reconstruct her understanding of the democratic problem that lies at the center of her political thought. The problem that Arendt identifies differs from that which governs the literature on public reason. According to her, the main issue is not how to adjudicate between competing claims in the public realm – rather, the issue is how to affirm freedom. In other words, the modern predicament lies in how we can remain willing and able to affirm freedom, despite the heavy burden that it places on us. This reconstruction of Arendt’s critique provides a new set of analytical spectacles for interpreting the contemporary crisis of expertise. When the crisis is seen from an Arendtian perspective, the democratic problem no longer appears as a matter of public reason, i.e., as an inability to contain disagreement within the limits of the reasonable. Instead, the crisis now appears to reflect a widespread sense of resignation, an inability to find meaning in public life. Hence, what is at stake in the contemporary crisis is essentially our ability to relate in meaningful ways to our common world.

In Chapter 4, I will move from critique to construction, and seek to develop a new conceptual understanding of ‘expert authority’ and its relationship to ‘public judgment.’ In other words, in this chapter, I will develop the conceptual building blocks that I need to construct a new normative approach to expertise. In this endeavor, I will go beyond the limits of Arendt’s own work, by examining her work on three central concepts – authority, the public, and judgment – and by using elements of her thought to shed new light on the public vocation of experts. The Arendtian concepts will help me construct a new understanding of expertise as modern-day authorities, a new understanding of the democratic public realm, and a new understanding of judgment as the practice by which human beings affirm their freedom. Taken together, the three concepts form the basis of the new approach to expertise, which responds to the predicament defined in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 5, finally, I will put the new approach in perspective by contrasting it with the instrumental and procedural approach discussed in Chapter 2. I will also discuss its significance in more normative terms and extract the normative guidance that can be gathered from it. In a nutshell, the argument that I will advance is that experts have a role that corresponds with the existential – not only the epistemic or rational – conditions for democratic politics. According to the instrumental view of political legitimacy, democracy can prevail only if it remains instrumental to the needs and interests of its citizens. According to the procedural view, democracy can prevail only by making citizens part of a fair political procedure. The existential approach is based on a third, alternative notion of legitimacy: it proceeds from the assumption that
democracy can prevail only if citizens remain willing and able to affirm freedom by making up their own minds about common issues. Thus, the central argument that I make in this thesis is that democracy needs experts not only to contain disagreement but also to support the conditions under which human beings can endure and find meaning in the burdens of democratic citizenship. The experts, I argue, can contribute to these conditions by assuming a role as “world-builders,” building public contexts for making sense of science and academic knowledge.
As I observed in the introductory chapter, the main trend in democratic theory has been to discuss expertise as a potential threat. Democracy – defined as “rule by the people” – is commonly juxtaposed against an epistocratic model of government, a “rule by knowers” where the experts reign supreme. Democratic scholars have wrestled with the normative question of why democracy ought to be preferred over expert rule. However, until recently, the question of how to understand the role of experts in democracy has received relatively little attention (see Turner 2003; Moore 2014; 2017; 2021). Expert knowledge is obviously vital to the functioning of modern democratic societies. Yet, it is not obvious that there is anything “democratic” about expertise as such. As Turner (2003) remarks, the value of scientific expertise has traditionally been regarded as strictly functional, and thus a matter of minimal interest to normative political theory. “It must be conceded that governments have a need for technical knowledge just as government buildings have a need for plumbing. But no-one imagines that political theory has failed or is somehow inadequate for failing to recognize the significance of plumbing” (Turner 2003: pp. 3-4). Consequently, the role of experts in democracy has often seemed too trivial to warrant systematic theoretical inquiry: their role is simply to be servants, but not the masters, of the political process.

This perspective, which I have characterized as the conventional view, relies on the assumption that science is apolitical at its essence. As we have also seen in the previous chapter, this premise appears increasingly untenable given the insights and arguments from Science and Technology Studies (STS). The growing body of STS research shows that the relationship between scientific knowledge and politics is far less straightforward than traditionally assumed. Scholars within this field contend that scientific methods and expert practices are not pure manifestations of a universal scientific ideal, but conventions shaped by the socio-political context in which they operate (see e.g., Jasanoff 2005). The criteria for evidence and certainty cannot be determined exclusively on a scientific basis but must also be considered in relation to the non-scientific objectives and interests that the experts are tasked to assist (see Douglas 2000; 2005; Jasanoff 2015). Furthermore, the distinction between science and other fields of human activity, such as politics, is not only a phil-
osophical issue but also a matter of practical judgment. Science and its demarcation from non-science is not reducible to analytical criteria but is better understood as the result of continuous “boundary-work” (Gieryn 1983; 2001). Thus, STS challenges the conventional notion of scientific expertise as a universal, value-neutral, and pre-political foundation from which democratic politics can proceed.

I have proposed that the challenge from STS should be understood as theoretical more than political. The insights and arguments from STS do not necessarily provide grounds for altering current political and/or scientific institutions. Nor does this challenge imply that lay citizens must be invited to participate directly in technical policy decisions. However, it does underscore the need revise our theoretical understanding of the relationship between knowledge and politics. The normative problem that emerges from the literature on STS, I suggest, is essentially a boundary problem. In a democracy, how should we draw the distinction between knowledge and politics?

In this chapter, I will examine how this issue has been addressed previously in political theory and examine the existing normative perspectives with a critical eye. The chapter unfolds in three steps. First, I will review the longstanding debate on public reason and identify the two predominant perspectives on how political legitimacy is produced in the democratic public realm. The concept of public reason originates from the Enlightenment and denotes the idea that political rules and decisions are legitimate only if they have a basis in universal reason. This understanding of legitimacy is closely associated with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In my examination of this literature, I will follow Gerald Gaus (2003) who distinguishes the classic Enlightenment view from contemporary theories of public reason, which all seek to articulate a normative foundation for politics that better corresponds with the conditions of modern democratic societies. In the post-Enlightenment literature, two main conceptions of public reason can be identified: one more instrumental, and one more procedural. In the second step of the chapter, I will extract the implications of these two conceptions and thereby construct two normative approaches to expertise. Finally, in the last step, I will subject the two approaches to critical examination. While the instrumental and the procedural approach both offer valuable insights into the normative relationship between democracy and expertise, I argue that they also divert attention from a significant issue underlying the contemporary crisis: the sense of alienation that impedes the ability of democratic publics to relate, in meaningful ways, to science and academic knowledge. I therefore conclude that our existing theories are insufficient. The limitations of the two currently predominant perspectives highlight the need for a new normative approach – one that considers the more existential, and not just the rational or epistemic, dimensions of the relationship between democracy and expertise. The rest of the dissertation will be my attempt to bring forth a theoretical perspective along these lines.
The Classic Concept of Public Reason

The concept of public reason pivots on the idea that political rules and decisions are legitimate only if they can be justified, in some sense, to everyone who is bound by them (Quong 2022). Theorists of public reason thus interpret the significance of the democratic public realm through a framework of universal justification. The standards of public reason apply to our interactions in the public realm but not to individuals in their private lives, and they make it possible for democratic politics to be something more or other than a mere expression of the majority will. In short, the standards of public reason provide democratic politics with a universal element and a normative core. While citizens diverge in terms of their interests, opinions, and conceptions of the good, they are united by their faculty of reason. Proponents of public reason therefore insist that the majority principle is insufficient to ensure political legitimacy. A legitimate politics must not only be supported by the majority. It must also be reasonable. Thus, majoritarian decisions and institutions are legitimate only if they maintain a connection with the public application of reason.

This notion of political legitimacy traces back to the Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th and 19th century. The classic view of public reason, which Gaus (2003) characterizes as ‘the Enlightenment view’, holds reason as the engine of progress – not only in the sciences, but in various realms of human existence. By subjecting political opinions and decisions to the test of public examination, we promote the development of society. A prominent example of this view can be found in John Stuart Mill’s (1859) argument for individual liberty. Mill’s political liberalism is based on the premise of human fallibility (1859/2012: ch. 2). Human beings, he asserts, are inherently fallible and susceptible to error. No truths can therefore ever be known for certain – even our most deeply held convictions can eventually prove erroneous. Nevertheless, Mill argues that a free and open process of public inquiry, which grants the individual a maximal freedom to express her views and experiment with different lifestyles, can offer some safeguards. Despite human fallibility, all (or nearly all) individuals also possess a faculty of reason, which enables them to seek universal truths. Humans are not only fallible but also capable of rectifying their errors through experience and dialogue (pp. 38-39). Hence, “[t]he only beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded” (pp. 40-41). It is by granting human beings the liberty to freely express their views in an open contest of ideas that truth can eventually prevail.

Mill’s argument, Gaus remarks, is premised on a strong belief in the universality of reason (2003: pp. 12-13). The commands of reason are in principle accessible to everyone. It is the universality of this human faculty that enables us to distinguish true from false, and right from wrong. Although our reasoning is fallible, it is also corrigible. Unlike falsehoods, the truth is available to reason, which works the same in everyone. An absolute certainty can never be
attained in the public realm. Nevertheless, we can at least be certain that the truth is more likely to prevail in the free and open competition on “the marketplace of ideas” (p. 13). Thus, the Enlightenment view of public reason not only emphasizes universal reason but also its public application. It is only by interacting with the views of other people, and by considering the arguments of our adversaries, that we can discover and rectify our mistakes. This suggests that the human faculty of reason can only properly come into play in a public arena:

[W]hile we are all subject to various sorts of biases, superstitions, and errors, these differ from one person (or group) to another. My biases and superstitions may appeal to me and some like-minded bigots, but they are unlikely to gain universal acceptance because not everyone shares by biases and superstitions. But, the liberal insists, the powers of reason are shared and universal. Reason is what unites us […] Overall reason selects the case for what is true rather than what is false. The exercise of our reason, then, leads us to agree. Mill – and here he speaks for much of the liberal tradition – was thus convinced that one aspect of social progress was convergence on an increasing body of truths (Gaus 2003: p. 13).

The classic concept of public reason is intricately linked with the liberal defense of individual liberties, such as freedom of speech. For liberals like Mill, the freedom of individuals to express their opinions must be upheld as a fundamental principle. Ideally, no opinions should be excluded from the public realm. As Mill vehemently argues, the public exchange of ideas is not only crucial for detecting and correcting erroneous beliefs but also for sustaining true beliefs. Just as we can never be certain that our beliefs are true, we can also never be entirely sure that an opinion we reject is false; and even if we are certain, “stifling it would be an evil still”, because “[a]ll silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility” (Mill: 1859/2012: p. 34). Rather than suppressing dissenting opinions, we should welcome them as opportunities to refine our own understanding.

Mill’s argument in defense of freedom of speech is premised on the acknowledgement of human fallibility. However, his argument also encapsulates the Enlightenment view on public reason, which posits that there are objective moral and political truths, and that these truths can be discovered through rational inquiry. The conviction that the public exchange of ideas and arguments can unveil universal truths is, essentially, the promise of the Enlightenment. If reason is permitted to prevail in the public realm, progress will eventually ensue.

The Enlightenment view is modeled on the idea of science and scientific progress (Gaus 2003: pp. 13-14). Science represents the collaborative pursuit of truth. Its objective is to uncover new truths, and scientific progress occurs
when new truths about the world are revealed. When scientists have the academic freedom to explore the world as it is, and to scrutinize and challenge the theories of their peers, it is anticipated that their endeavors will yield progress – that is, an enhancement of our understanding of the world. The universal nature of scientific knowledge also fosters the anticipation that our scientific endeavors will eventually result in agreement, a “scientific consensus,” on the truths that have been uncovered. The Enlightenment perspective extends this notion of science and scientific progress to other domains of human existence. If individuals are granted the liberty to “experiment” with diverse beliefs and lifestyles, to openly communicate the “findings” of their investigations, and to critically evaluate and contest the assertions of others, this will lead to new discoveries – not only in science but also in the realm of politics and morality. Consequently, the Enlightenment view fosters the anticipation that the public exercise of reason will foster greater unity over time, as individual converge around a growing number of rational viewpoints (ibid: p. 15).

Two Categories of Critique

The Enlightenment view of public reason did not fade away with the end of the Enlightenment as an historical era but persists as a distinct branch of contemporary liberal theory (Gaus 2003: p. 26). Nevertheless, throughout the 20th century, numerous objections have been raised against it, and the predominant tendency among contemporary theorists has been to articulate new conceptions of public reason that can withstand such criticism more effectively. Let us therefore examine two primary strands of critique against the Enlightenment view, before turning to the contemporary conceptions of public reason that have been articulated in response to these objections.

The first critique against the Enlightenment view targets its optimism about the public use of reason, and more specifically, the notion that ordinary citizens can and should participate actively in a public process of rational inquiry. This critique was famously articulated by the journalist and political writer Walter Lippmann in the 1920s7. Lippmann argued that our conventional conceptions of democracy have embraced a romanticized misconception of citizens as “omnicompetent” (1922/2007: p. 87; 1925/1993: p. 11, 29). The notion that democracy entails citizens actively engaging in governing themselves wrongly assumes that ordinary individuals are capable of educating themselves on all matters of public concern. In reality, Lippmann contends, the average citizen “gives little of his time to public affairs [and] has but a causal interest in facts and but a poor appetite for theory” (1925/1993: pp. 14-15). Generally, people lack the time, interest, education, and/or cognitive ability

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7 Since then, similar objections have been raised by scholars who criticize standard assumptions in democratic theory and argue in favor of a more realistic conception of democratic politics, see e.g., Schumpeter (1942); Achen & Bartels (2016).
required to engage in a meaningful process of reasoning about public affairs. A realistic theory of democracy must therefore construe the role of citizens as much more limited than commonly assumed. Democracy, Lippmann insists, does not entail citizens actively participating in public discourse and decision-making. It simply means that they have the right to elect their leaders, thereby possessing the power to “kick the bastards out” when the elite appear to be failing in their duties.

Lippmann developed his political realism as a critical rejoinder to the idealistic conception of democracy envisioned by the American Founding Fathers. However, his objection also challenges the Enlightenment view on public reason, which posits an equally idealistic conception of the public. According to Lippmann and other proponents of political realism, public reason does not serve as a reliable bulwark against superstition and bias, at least not under modern circumstances. In contemporary mass societies, public opinion does not emerge from a rational process of inquiry, based on reliable information and critical thinking. Instead, it is better understood as the product of ‘sterotypes’ – that is, simplistic and prejudiced notions that can become entrenched in our minds, persisting even when refuted by compelling factual evidence (Lippmann 1922/2007: p. 37). Thus, public opinion does not emanate from human reason but from mass psychology. Lippmann therefore contends that we should dismiss the idea of reasoning as a suitable activity for public life. Rather than relying on public opinion, he proposes that democratic governments should seek counsel from an independent body of experts. Ordinary citizens, he suggests, should not be burdened with political matters. Their role in democratic politics must be understood as strictly limited to electoral participation: “To support the Ins when things are going well; to support the Outs when they seem to be going badly, this, in spite of all that has been said about tweedledum and tweedledee, is the essence of popular government” (1925/1993: p. 116).

The second objection against the Enlightenment view targets its optimism regarding public reason as a catalyst for human progress. The public application of reason, these critics argue, does not inevitably lead to progress, because reason can serve both as a source of emancipation and an instrument of oppression. The idea that modern rationalization entails both progress and oppression, and that the Enlightenment view therefore carries within itself an element of contradiction, is famously articulated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). The ambivalence of modernity is also a prominent theme in Max Weber’s influential analysis of modernity (1904/2001; 1919/2009), which foreshadows the critical theory later developed by the Frankfurt School.

Modernity, on Weber’s account, is characterized by a process of rationalization and demystification, leading to a world where “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation” (1919/2009: p.139). The modern advance-
ments of science and technology have greatly improved the capacity of individuals and human collectives to control and master their environment. However, there is also a dark side to modern rationalization. Weber, like Adorno and Horkheimer, assumes an instrumental conception of reason. Rationalization thus enhances our capacity to determine the most effective means by which to achieve our ends. However, it does not improve our ability to reason about ends: to determine the values we ought to cherish, or the social goals we should pursue. In pre-modern societies, religion and tradition served as a cultural foundation for substantive rationality, i.e., a common ground from which to reason jointly about shared meanings and values. However, in the modern era, these traditional belief systems have lost their authoritative status and rational calculation has supplanted them as our guiding principle. Weber therefore contends that modern rationalization is accompanied with a parallel process of disenchantment (1919/2009: p. 155). The loss of faith in the supernatural creates a void of meaninglessness and nihilism. Despite the tremendous advancements of modern science in enhancing our instrumental capabilities, it cannot improve our ability to reason about questions of value and meaning, because the answers to such questions cannot be revealed through empirical observation or logical deduction. In response to the decline of the traditional sources of meaning and value, Weber predicts a “polytheistic” process of re-enchantment, characterized by a proliferation of incommensurable belief systems (see Kim 2022). Thus, in contrast with the Enlightenment view, which envisions convergence on political and moral truths, Weber anticipates that the modern world will be marked by profound and irreconcilable disagreement.

From a Weberian perspective, reason presents both a promise and peril to human emancipation. On the one hand, the rationalization of modern society has greatly enhanced the autonomy of individuals and human collectives to attain the ends of their own choosing. On the other hand, by undermining the cultural underpinnings of substantive rationality, rationalization also threatens to reduce human beings to isolated cogs in a society that increasingly resembles a vast and impersonal machinery. The oppression of modern rationalization lies in its tendency to trap us all inside an “iron cage” of instrumental efficiency (1904/2001: pp. 123-124). In some sense, this cage is the result of human progress. However, on Weber’s account, a progress of this kind does not equate to human emancipation:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart;
In summary, critics of the Enlightenment view have contested both its conception of ‘the public’ and ‘reason’. In response to these and other objections, contemporary theorists have sought to develop new theories of public reason that better suit the conditions of the modern world. Gaus characterizes this endeavor as a project of “post-Enlightenment liberalism” (2003: pp. 26-27). The prefix “post”, however, does not signify a complete departure from the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment. This contemporary strand of political thought, which we may also describe as neo-Kantianism, upholds the belief in individual and political freedom as principles grounded in reason, as well as the conviction that individual liberty can coexist with peaceful collaboration (ibid). The goal is to reinterpret the concept of public reason for the modern world and to “explain how there can be such principles in a world where the exercise of reason so often leads to divergence and disagreement” (ibid). Contemporary theorists of public reason can therefore be seen as the heirs of Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Mill, while also taking the criticism against this tradition seriously.

Contemporary Perspectives on Public Reason
In the contemporary literature on public reason, a rough distinction can be made between the two main perspectives: one more instrumental and one more procedural.

According to proponents of the more instrumental perspective, the mistake of the Enlightenment view is that it overstates the emancipatory potential of public reason. The lofty expectation “the triumph of the scientific spirit will sweep away the forces of prejudice, superstition, stupidity and cruelty” (Berlin 1980/2013: p. 74) has led to wishful, utopian thinking. The idea that reason can provide us with blueprints for constructing an ideal society wrongly suggests that rational planning can be used as a panacea against all kinds of social problems. For thinkers like Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), such optimism about the emancipatory potential of politics is not only unfounded but also dangerous. On his account, the Enlightenment view is an instance of “monism”, a philosophical outlook that rests on the following three assumptions: (1) all real questions have a single true answer; (2) the answers to these questions can be attained if we apply the right method of inquiry; and (3) all true beliefs are consistent with one another, or else they are mistaken (1988/2013: p. 6). In contrast, Berlin advocates value pluralism, a philosophical view that acknowledges that there are many true values and ends that reasonable people may endorse, even if they are not always compatible. Clashes of values, he contends, are inevitable: “Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. This is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail
an irreparable loss” (p. 14). However, Berlin’s critique of the monistic belief in a “final solution” (p. 15) is not solely conceptual. He also finds the idea deeply disturbing from a political-psychological point of view:

If one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever – what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken – that was the faith of Lenin, of Trotsky, of Mao, for all I know, of Pol Pot (1988/2013: p. 16).

If the mistake of the Enlightenment view lies in its overly optimistic belief in the emancipatory potential of public reason, then it seems that the solution must be found in an intellectual approach that stresses moderation, caution, and humility. These qualities are indeed characteristic of the so-called “Cold War liberals” (see Müller 2008). Cold War liberalism is not a coherent philosophical doctrine or a unitary school of thought but a label that is commonly used to describe the political thinking of a loosely defined group of intellectuals who were active during the Cold War era: Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Raymond Aron, and Judith Shklar. According to Müller, these thinkers share a common sensibility rather than a set of fixed ideas. What unites them is a sense of disillusionment with the notion of political progress, and the liberalism they espoused was therefore a “liberalism without illusions” (Yack 1996), or even a “liberalism of fear” (Shklar 1989/1998).

While the Enlightenment philosophers championed individual liberty for the sake of human emancipation, the Cold War liberals insisted that a rational liberalism for the modern age must be defined in the negative. Rather than pursuing an ideal vision of the greatest good, it ought to “begin with a sum-mum malum, which all of us know and would avoid if only we could” (Shklar 1989/1998: p. 11). Thus, the conception of public reason that emerge from this strand of political liberalism finds its basis of universality not in an ideal that everyone ought to endorse, but in the evils that all reasonable beings wish to avoid.

The Cold War liberals advocated what may be described as a conservative liberalism, though Müller clarifies that their conservatism pertained to the procedures of politics, not its substance (2008: p. 57). These intellectuals harbored skepticism toward sweeping political agendas and ideologies that promised radical transformations of society or of mankind. A reasonable quest for progress, they argued, could only come about in a piecemeal fashion, and could ultimately be achieved only through the free deeds and decisions of individuals. What they wished to conserve, thus, was not social hierarchies but the hard-earned openness of society.
The mid-20th century is often depicted as a bleak period for political philosophy, characterized by a lack of fervor and engagement with political systems and ideals. According to a common narrative, the revival occurred in 1971 with the publication of John Rawls’s seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*. The launch of this book marked the “rebirth” of a more idealistic and systematic approach to political philosophy, a style of thinking that had lain dormant in the anglophone world for decades (see e.g., Kymlicka 1990). However, in his later writings, Rawls presents his theory in a manner that aligns more closely with the political outlook of his Cold War predecessors. In contrast with his theory of justice, Rawls’s political liberalism – specifically, his theory of public reason – exhibits a noticeable “conservative” inclination, reflecting the spirit of caution and restraint which governed liberal political theory in the 1950s and 60s.

In *Political Liberalism* (2005), Rawls grapples with what he terms “the problem of stability”: how to win the consent of the members of a liberal society, and hence ensure their willingness to comply with the rules and commands of its public institutions. Rawls acknowledges that even a perfectly just society might occasionally need to resort to coercion to maintain order. However, he also contends that coercion is not a viable solution to the stability problem as he defines it, since, from a liberal standpoint, coercion should be accepted only as an exception. On his account, a just and well-ordered society can be sustained over time only if its members find internal motivation to abide by its rules. Moreover, this motivation must be based on something other than a mere *modus vivendi*. A more principled approach to political legitimacy is needed: an approach that delineates a universal foundation for consent (pp. 458-460). Rawls’s political liberalism thus builds on the Kantian idea that the legitimacy of political government hinges on its ability to justify itself to its constituents. It is not enough for political systems to adhere to the principles of justice. A stable, well-ordered society must also be recognized as legitimate by those who are subject to its rule.

The normative problem that Rawls addresses is how we may reconcile the Kantian principle of universal legitimacy with the realities of modern politics. More specifically, he seeks to articulate a conception of public reason premised on “the fact of [reasonable] pluralism”, that is, a conception that acknowledges that modern societies feature “a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines” (2005: xvi). Acknowledging this fact means accepting that, for most matters of common concern, we cannot expect that the public application of reason will lead to unanimous conclusions. Disagreement must therefore be accepted as a permanent feature of free, democratic societies.

In his attempt to reconcile universal legitimacy with reasonable disagreement, Rawls draws a distinction between ‘political’ and ‘comprehensive’ doctrines. A comprehensive doctrine “includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, as well as ideals of personal virtue and character, that are to inform
much of our nonpolitical conduct (in the limit of our life as a whole)” (2005: p. 175). The Enlightenment view is one example. Conversely, a political doctrine is narrower in scope. It also involves moral considerations, however, “it is a moral conception worked out for a specific kind of subject, namely for political, social, and economic institutions” (p. 11). Political doctrines pertain solely to the basic societal structure, and they apply to individuals only in their role as citizens. Thus, what Rawls aims for is not a new liberal ideology but something more universal, a liberalism that is “shared by everyone” (p. xix).

Rawls’s theory of public reason echoes the procedural conservatism of the Cold War liberals. While distinct from Shklar’s notion of a liberalism of fear, Rawls similarly defines his liberalism in defensive terms. The point is not to pursue some universally desirable ideal but to establish the limits of reasonable disagreement. What he espouses, therefore, is not an emancipatory liberal ideology but a liberalism that is better understood as a normative constitutional framework, designed to accommodate a plurality of different worldviews. This framework gains legitimacy through an “overlapping consensus”: it is a constitutions that can be endorsed, albeit for different reasons, from the perspective of all reasonable worldviews (2005: Part. 2: IV). According to Rawls, the legitimacy and stability of a liberal political order ultimately hinge on citizens adhering to the norms of public reasons, which means that they must explain their standpoints in terms that others can accept as consists with their freedom and equality (p. 218). When individuals participate in public life, as citizens, they must therefore refrain from reasons that are unacceptable to those of different worldviews (e.g., religious or ethical).

Rawls and the Cold War liberals exemplify a more instrumental conception of public reason. Public reason, according to this perspective, is instrumental to the preservation of democracy. Unlike the Enlightenment view, it rejects the notion of public reason as a path to human emancipation. Instead, the goal is to uphold individual freedom and foster peaceful political collaboration. The public application of reason does not necessarily lead us to discover Truths with a capital T. Nevertheless, it is crucial to the preservation of a democratic order. Public reason ensures that the system of government is acceptable to all (reasonable) citizens, thereby enhancing the ability of democratic regimes to sustain themselves over time.

According to the proponents of the instrumental view, it is essential to maintain a clear and principled boundary between ‘public’ and ‘private’. This distinction not only enables us to define the public realm as the realm where citizens are obligated to adhere to universal principles. It also allows us to delineate the private realm as a realm free from such imperatives. As Evan Charney (1998) explains, a limited conception of the public realm “serves to guarantee the autonomy of associational life within civil society and its independence from the coercive powers of the state (or, for that matter, from the ‘coercive power’ of normative political theory)” (p. 97). In matters of public concern, citizens have a moral duty to abide by the dictates of public reason.
From a Rawlsian perspective, for instance, this means that we have a duty to refrain from religious arguments in our deliberations concerning law and justice. However, it is crucial that the norms of public reason apply only within a clearly defined realm. The distinction between public and private is vital, as it ensures the existence of a corresponding private sphere where individuals and communities are free live and interact according to their own private conceptions of the good. Thus, according to the instrumental theory, a principled boundary between the public and private is an indispensable safeguard for individual liberty. This point is emphatically stressed by Judith Shklar (1989/1998), who asserts that, for liberals, the distinction between public and private is nonnegotiable. While this distinction may shift with time, it is nevertheless one that must always exist and be consciously defended. “The important point for liberalism is not so much where the line is drawn, as that it be drawn, and that it must under no circumstances be ignored or forgotten” (p. 6).

The proponents of the instrumental view are primarily concerned about the political implications of an excessively optimistic belief in the emancipatory potential of “the scientific spirit”. In contrast, advocates of the more procedural view – exemplified here by Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib – are more worried that the spirit of the Enlightenment is being quelled by other forces at play in the modern world. The conception of public reason that they advance is procedural in the sense that they perceive the public application of reason as a constitutive element of democracy – an integral part of the democratic procedure rather than an instrument for its preservation.

Like Weber, Adorno, and Horkheimer, Habermas acknowledges the dark side of modern rationalization. In his view, modern politics has been increasingly reduced to mere administration, with political issues redefined into technical problems to be solved by experts. The rise of modern mass society, Habermas (1962/1989) argues, has led to a structural transformation of the public sphere, driven by the emergence of consumer capitalism and the welfare state. With this transformation, ideas have been turned into commodities (to be “sold” to voters), citizens have been turned into consumers and clients of social welfare, and politics itself has increasingly been transformed into a strategic game of power. The negative aspects of modernity – the “colonization of the lifeworld” by economic, bureaucratic, and technological rationalities, and the “juridification” of the relationship between citizens and the state – have stifled the Enlightenment project (1981; 1981/1984-1987). However, Habermas rejects Weber’s conclusion that the “iron cage” is the inevitable fate for modern society. There is a solution to the ills of rationalization, and according to Habermas, this solution lies in a rationalization of a different kind – a rationalization based on communicative rationality (Habermas 1981/1984-1987).

Unlike instrumental rationality, which focuses on the means to achieve predefined ends, communicative rationality seeks genuine agreement and shared
understanding. Such reasoning cannot be undertaken by individuals in their isolation. Communicative rationality is inherently intersubjective: it is reflected in our capacity to make ourselves understood, to understand others, and to cooperate in search for a shared understanding. In modern societies, where traditional sources of social values have waned, Habermas argues that modernity “has to create its normativity out of itself” (Habermas 1985/1987: p. 7, italics in original). In other words, under modern conditions, the void left by the loss of tradition and religion must be filled through the public application of communicative reason.

According to Seyla Benhabib (1992; 1997; 2018), Habermas’s deliberative model of the public holds better promise than Rawls’s more limited conception, in which ‘the public’ is understood in terms of a limited, specific domain that revolves around the principles and institutions of the legal system. Benhabib conceptualizes the public realm as the “anonymous conversation” (1997: p. 17) taking place in civil society. This conversation is not bound to a predetermined agenda or any specific arena; rather, “[t]he public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in practical discourse, evaluating their validity” (1992: p. 105). Benhabib concurs with Rawls that the legitimacy of public institutions is “in the public eye” – that is, that their legitimacy is determined by the public process of scrutiny and examination (2018: p. 108). However, she rejects the notion that publicity should be defined in terms of neutrality and the idea that public reason obligates citizens from bringing certain matters to the public-political agenda. Rather than neutralizing political relations by assimilating them within a juridical model of the public realm, Benhabib argues that political struggles over the distinction between public and private must be acknowledged as an integral aspect of democratic politics:

Democratic politics challenges, redefines and renegotiates the divisions between the good and the just, the moral and the legal, the private and the public. For these distinctions, as they have been established by modern states at the end of social and historical struggles, contain within them the result of historical power compromises (Benhabib 1992: pp. 99-100).

Historically, the political inclusion of new groups in society – the working class, women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants – has led to the politicization of issues once considered private. Benhabib uses the example of workplace security to illustrate her point. In times and places lacking a robust working-class movement, concerns regarding the health and well-being of workers in their workplace, such as workplace accidents and exposure to harmful chemicals, have “frequently [been] construed by employers as issues of ‘trade secrets’ and ‘business privacy’” (1992: p. 100). Benhabib therefore contends that historical experience contradicts the notion that the public-political
agenda should adhere to a priori restrictions. Political contestation over the public agenda is part and parcel of democracy. To critically examine and contest the existing boundary between public and private, and what it excludes from our political field of vision, is exactly what democratic politics is all about. While Benhabib suggests that Rawls’s theory can be interpreted favorably as a theory of public justification applicable to the formal judgments of legal institutions, she contends that his theory “has little to do with the political speech and deliberation of ordinary citizens in the public marketplace” (1997: p. 13). The instrumental view, she argues, provides merely a regulative principle, but not a theory of public reasoning within the democratic process.

The instrumental and procedural view both embody the Kantian notion that political rules and decisions must be justifiable to all members of society. However, the procedural view posits that the universality of our political arguments cannot be determined in advance. In his commentary on Rawls’s Political Liberalism, Habermas contends that the Kantian doctrine of universal reason cannot be interpreted “in a monological fashion” (2011: p. 32). Isolated individuals cannot anticipate what types of reasons others will find reasonable until they engage with them politically. Therefore, the substantive meaning of public reason cannot be philosophically determined. The general acceptability of a claim can only be validated by subjecting it to the test of actual deliberation. According to the procedural theory, public reason is inherently a cooperative endeavor that necessitates active participation in a communicative process adhering to certain procedural criteria. In the democratic public sphere, no subject matter is in principle off limits. Citizens may introduce any issue into the democratic discussion, provided that the debate itself meets procedural requirements of respect, inclusion, equality, and so forth.

In democratic politics nothing is really off the agenda of public debate, but there are fundamental rules of discourse which are both constitutive and regulatory in such a manner that, although what they mean for democratic give and take is itself always contested, the rules themselves cannot be suspended or abrogated by simple majoritarian procedures (Benhabib 1992: p. 107).

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8 In his deliberative theory of democracy, Habermas specifies a set of assumptions that participants must make when engaging in political communication. Kevin Olson (2014) describes these “pragmatic presuppositions” as follows: “Most crucially, deliberative participants have to presuppose that anyone can take part in discourse and anyone can introduce and challenge claims that are made there. They must also see one another as equals, reciprocally granting one another equal status in deliberation. Further, they must assume that others are under no compulsion while they are participating, by either the direct or implied force of others. Participants must ‘presuppose’ these features in the sense that they would not think of a political argument as justified if some people, who may have important things to say about it, have been excluded from the discussion, or if the participants don’t see one another as equals who needed to be persuaded to agree to the claims being made. Political interaction can count as deliberative only when participants approach it with these presuppositions in the background of their acts” (p. 140).
While the instrumental view is premised on a notion of freedom as freedom from politics, the procedural view endorses a more political notion of freedom as collective autonomy or self-determination. However, in the interpretations of Habermas and Benhabib, the “self” in self-determination is de-substantiated and depersonalized. Sovereignty does not pertain to any political “body” but resides in the “subjectless forms of communication that regulate the flow of deliberations in such a way that their fallible results enjoy the presumption of rationality” (Habermas 1999a: p. 143). The notion of ‘the People’ is replaced with an impersonal concept of the democratic public as an “anonymous conversation” (Benhabib 1997: p. 17). Thus, in some sense, the procedural theory of public reason holds that the boundaries of legitimate disagreement ought to be determined by the popular will. However, this “will” does not equate to the will of any specific individual or group (such as the majority), but rather denotes the anonymous opinion emerging from the communicative interactions between socially mobilized groups in civil society and formal political institutions.

Two Normative Approaches to Expertise in Democracy

The expert role examined in this thesis pertains not to the implementation of democratic decisions, but rather to the democratic process of opinion-formation. As argued in the previous chapter, this role prompts reflection on how to navigate the boundary between politics and knowledge in the public realm. The contemporary crisis of expertise underscores the vulnerability of the democratic public realm: the authority, but also the uncertainty, of scientific knowledge can be exploited to manipulate public opinion. The crisis thereby actualizes the question of how to understand the link between public opinion-formation and political legitimacy. As we have seen, this question is the focal point for a longstanding debate in political theory: the debate on public reason. In my review of this debate, I have distinguished between the two theoretical perspectives that predominate in the contemporary literature: one more instrumental, and one more procedural.

In this section, I will extract the implications of the instrumental and the procedural view to delineate two normative approaches to expertise in democracy. The two approaches provide different answers to three questions: (1) the normative basis of expert authority; (2) the diagnosis of the crisis of expertise; and (3) the role of experts in democracy. While the two approaches are my own analytical constructions, I will substantiate them by referring to arguments and ideas espoused by scholars who have discussed the normative role of experts in democracy. The aim, however, is not to provide a comprehensive survey of the various positions that have been articulated in this debate, but to elucidate an important tension that governs the normative discussion about expertise in democracy.
The most fundamental distinction between the two approaches lies in their respective notions of the normative foundation for expert authority. The instrumental approach posits that experts have authority in virtue of their capacity to deliver knowledge to the public realm. This capacity renders expertise indispensable to democracy in numerous ways. For instance, Holst and Molander (2017) contend that dependence on expertise constitutes a fundamental “fact” in modern democratic societies, akin to Rawls’s fact of reasonable pluralism. Rational decision-making under contemporary conditions is simply unfeasible unless citizens and policymakers rely extensively on expert knowledge and advice. At first glance, this justification of expert authority appears to resonate with the conventional view outlined in Chapter 1 – i.e., the perspective that views expertise as serving a strictly functional role in democratic politics. However, the instrumental approach diverges from the conventional view by attributing a more normative role to experts in the democratic public realm. Expertise is not merely indispensable for the functioning of democratic governments; it is also instrumental in realizing core democratic values, such as accountability and responsive government. For example, Michael Schudson (2006) observes that experts can empower citizens by disseminating their knowledge to a wider audience and by calling awareness to threats or injustices that would otherwise be left unnoticed. Similarly, Robert Pielke (2007) suggests that experts can expand the range of political alternatives by broadening our perspective on available policy options. Hence, experts are not only instrumental in enhancing the epistemic quality of reasoning that underpins public discourse and decision-making; they are also instrumental in the sense that democracy depends on their services to realize its own aspirations. Perhaps most importantly, experts possess the ability to “speak truth to power”. Thus, without experts, the capacity of citizens to hold their political leaders accountable would be significantly reduced.

In contrast to the conventional view, the instrumental approach recognizes that the boundary problem cannot be solved merely by defining a division of labor between experts and citizens. It acknowledges that the issue is more complex than conveyed by old adages, which hold that the proper place for experts is to be “on tap, not on top”. The conventional view assumes a notion of scientific expertise as neutral knowledge. Conversely, the instrumental approach acknowledges that scientific expertise is shaped also by values and ends. As noted by Zeynep Pamuk (2021), this implies that “the worry that gave rise to the means-ends division of labor solution […] cannot in fact be addressed through the division of labor itself” (p. 51). Modern democratic politics is characterized by the hybridization of knowledge and politics. Many present political conflicts revolve around defining reality as much as they do around competing values. Moreover, many of the knowledge claims that cir-
culate in the public domain belong to a category of expertise that “is concerned, at least in part, with influencing public opinion in order to produce political results” (Turner 2003: p. 71). When experts use their knowledge and authority to promote a political agenda, they engage in what Pielke (2007) terms “Issue Advocacy”. For example, scientists engage in such advocacy when they draw on their knowledge to protest against government decisions, or to promote a policy or political reform. According to the instrumental approach, such political involvement is not inherently problematic from a democratic standpoint. However, issue advocacy becomes a problem for democracy when experts couch their ideological views in a scientific language, and thereby fail to transparently distinguish between their scientific views and their personal opinions as citizens.

That some scientists engage in political activities is neither new nor problematic; they are after all citizens. A problem exists when […] scientists implicitly or explicitly equate scientific arguments with political arguments, and in the process reinforce a simplistic and misleading view of how science supports policy […] Scientists seeking political victories through science may find this strategy expedient in the short term, but over the long run it may diminish the constructive role that scientific expertise can play in the policy process (Pielke 2007: pp. 120-121).

What is important from a democratic point of view, Pielke argues, is not that experts refrain from value-laden judgments but that they are careful to distinguish between their scientific views and their personal and political standpoints. In a democracy, experts – like all citizens – are entitled to advocate for causes they support, and to utilize their experience and knowledge in doing so. However, the instrumental value of expertise to democracy ultimately hinges on the preservation of a clear distinction between politics and knowledge. Therefore, expertise poses a challenge to democracy when experts claim scientific authority for their political beliefs, or when political actors regard their judgments as universally valid “results”, available to everyone who is willing to “follow the science”. As Pielke contends, “[i]t is when advocacy is couched in the purity of science that problems are created for both science and policy” (2007: p. 134). The premise underlying the instrumental approach is that politics and knowledge derive authority from distinct sources: democracy versus science. The democratic nature of the public realm and its ability to foster political legitimacy rely on the clear demarcation between the two. Although public discourse inevitably involves a blend of politics and knowledge, these two elements must “mix like oil and water” (Collins, Weinel & Evans 2010: p. 194).

In contrast to the instrumental approach, the procedural approach holds that politics and knowledge are bound to a common source of authority. According to this perspective, the authority of scientific experts is not sustained simply
by virtue of their ability to deliver knowledge to the public realm. Rather, the public realm is the site where authoritative knowledge can come into being. To the extent that experts can be considered as authorities in their own right, this hierarchical relationship between experts and citizens must undergo continuous justification through a public process of reasoning. This process entails engaging scientific perspectives in dialogue with the views and experiences of non-expert citizens. Unlike the instrumental approach, the procedural approach does not view expertise as instrumental to achieving democratic values; rather, it perceives expertise as a constitutive component of the democratic procedure itself. Under modern conditions, at least, expertise is not merely a tool to empower the popular will; rather, the capacity of experts to bridge scientific and public discourse is integral to the process by which the popular will can come into being. Consequently, the authority of science is to some extent intertwined with the authority of democracy. According to the procedural approach, science and democracy are not two separate realms, governed by two distinct ideals. Rather, science and democracy are interdependent, deriving their authority from a shared source: the rational force of communication.

The procedural perspective on authority finds its roots in the ideas of American pragmatists, who viewed both science and democracy as the “outcomes of cooperative social activity and its institutionalization” (Bohman 1999: p. 593). John Dewey, a prominent figure in the pragmatic movement, perceives democracy as not merely a governmental structure but a “way of life” (see Nathanson 1951: ch. 4). A commitment to science is implicated in the democratic way of life, because science and democracy both ultimately rely on confidence in the experimental method of social inquiry. Thus, as Stuhr notes, “[c]reative democracy and creative intelligence are two sides of the same coin” (2017: p. 300). Modern democracy is at once political and epistemic: the challenge, therefore, is not only to apply scientific findings to political problems “but to bring inquiry into democratic decision making” (Bohman 1999: p. 591). The notion that science and democracy share a common foundation suggests that science must be democratically organized to acquire authority; and correspondingly, that democratic politics must “not only employ the free and open deliberation of citizens but also the best available methods of inquiry” (Bohman 1999: pp. 590-1). In other words, the notion of science and democracy as co-original undergirds the procedural approach.

From a proceduralist perspective, the inclination to establish a clear division between politics and knowledge is problematic. A too rigid boundary will reify the meaning of politics and shield expert assertions from public scrutiny and debate. A sharp distinction between the political and the scientific imposes predefined analytical constraints on the experimental process of social inquiry. From a proceduralist point of view, the problem with such sharp boundaries is that they may foster a narrow, legalistic conception of politics that favors the preservation of the status quo. A reasonable approach to expertise should
acknowledge that the boundary between politics and knowledge is contingent and open to legitimate contention. As Mark Brown (2009) observes, there are numerous historical examples that illustrate how knowledge claims that were once considered apolitical can suddenly become fiercely political:

Feminist philosophy of science, for example, has challenged the gender biases in certain areas of biological research. AIDS activists have shown how protocols for clinical trials of new drugs incorporate assumptions about the relative priority of scientific certainty and patient welfare. These and other examples of politicized science echo the politicization of race, class, and gender relations in businesses, churches, universities, and families (Brown 2009: p. 12)

The notion of politicization as an assault on the authority of science appears oblivious to the historical fact that legitimate political struggles have continuously arisen over science. On Brown’s account, political contestation over science is not necessarily a threat against the epistemic basis of democracy. Struggles over the description of reality are expected in a democratic and open society because such descriptions are inevitably intertwined with conflicts over values and interests (2009: pp. 2-3). Contrary to the idea that scientific knowledge must be shielded from political contestation, theorists who advance a more procedural approach insist that “politics has no essential or necessary boundaries” (Moore 2017: pp. 35-6). This does not imply that everything is political or that no boundaries between politics and knowledge can ever be sustained. Rather, what it means is that, in a democracy, everything can become political, even science⁹ (see Brown 2009; Moore 2017). According to the procedural approach, what is needed are not analytical criteria that enable us to sharply demarcate knowledge from politics. The limits of reasonable disagreement over science cannot be theoretically determined. Instead, these boundaries must be perceived as, ideally, the tentative outcome of a legitimate process. The relevant question is therefore not how to sustain a theoretically defined boundary between knowledge and politics, but rather how to create the conditions under which such boundaries can be contested and renegotiated in a manner that is both reasonable and legitimate.

According to the procedural approach, the justifiability of expert authority has less to do with the ability of experts to maintain a clear distinction between scientific and political claims, and more with the socio-political context in which it is embedded. For example, Moore (2017) argues, in line with the procedural approach, that the authority of experts ultimately depends “on the exercise of public judgment in a context where there are live possibilities for

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⁹ Both Brown and Moore follow Mark Warren (1999) in defining politics as “the subset of social relations characterized by conflict over goods in the face of pressure to associate for collective action, where at least one party to the conflict seeks collectively binding decisions and seeks to sanction decisions by means of power” (p. 218, italics in original).
The notion that expert claims ought to be open to public scrutiny and contestation may seem almost commonplace. Scholars who defend a more instrumental perspective also tend to emphasize the need for transparency and institutional mechanisms for holding experts accountable (see e.g., Pamuk 2021; Holst & Molander 2017). Yet, the instrumental approach holds that the purpose of such scrutiny is to hold experts accountable to a predefined standard of scientific authority, i.e., that it is needed to ensure “that the experts are really experts and that they use their competencies in the right way” (Holst & Molander 2017: p. 235). In contrast, the procedural approach invites us to perceive public scrutiny and criticism as constitutive elements of the authority relation itself. Public scrutiny and criticism are not merely constraints on expert authority but part of its constitution, because it is only by publicly demonstrating their knowledge and by becoming publicly recognized as ‘expert’ that scientists and academics can acquire a position of authority in the first place. Public disputes over science are therefore not just a way of controlling that “the experts are really experts” but the way in which experts can become real experts. Thus, when experts are asked to justify their claims or activities in response to public criticism, this is not an assault on their authority as much as a “constitutive moment”, an opportunity for the authority relation to be renewed (Moore 2017: p. 75). According to the procedural approach, the division of labor between experts and citizens does not reflect an analytical distinction between politics and knowledge but is better understood as a dynamic relationship, which must be renegotiated and reestablished continuously (p. 66).

(2) Diagnosis of the Crisis

The two approaches also yield two different diagnoses of the contemporary crisis of expertise. According to the instrumental approach, the crisis reflects the erosion of scientific authority that accompanies the blurring of the boundary between knowledge and politics. In contrast, the procedural approach views the crisis not solely as a crisis of scientific authority but equally a crisis of democracy, reflecting the failure of our existing institutions to facilitate a rational and inclusive public conversation.

The instrumental approach suggests that the crisis illustrates a failure to properly sustain the boundary between knowledge and politics. This approach understands knowledge and politics as bound to two separate sources of authority, and a problem therefore arises when these are confounded: when science is politicized, but also when politics is “expertized” in ways that jeopardize democratic values like inclusion and equality. A principled boundary is needed to protect both science and democracy. While some scholars are mostly concerned with expertization as a democratic threat, i.e., with the question of “how to make expertise safe, or at least more safe, for democracy” (Schudson 2006: p. 505); others are more concerned about politicization as a
threat to expertise, and hence, with the question of “how democracy [can] become safe, or safer, for expertise” (p. 506). In other words, according to the instrumental approach, the loss of distance between science and democracy in the modern public realm raises two problems. The first problem is the potential deficit of democratic legitimacy that emerges due to our extensive reliance on expertise in public discourse and policymaking. A democracy that systematically reframes political issues in technical problems to be solved by experts could eventually turn into an epistocracy, or a semi-epistocratic system that Robert Dahl describes as a “quasi guardianship” (Dahl 1989: pp. 187-191). The second problem is that the politicization of science entails a loss of expert authority, which leads in turn to the erosion of the epistemic foundation of democratic politics. These two problems are somewhat in tension with one another, as the solutions to the first problem (e.g., to enhance transparency and the possibilities for public participation) appear to exacerbate the second one. Expertization as a potential democratic threat has been discussed many times by theorists and social scientists (see e.g., Shapiro 1994; Habermas 1971). Here, however, I will focus on the second problem: the politicization of science and academic knowledge as a threat against the epistemic basis of democracy.

According to the instrumental approach, the crisis of expertise illustrates a failure to protect scientific knowledge from harmful politicization. For example, this interpretation is advanced by Collins, Weinel, and Evans (2010), who contend that modern democratic societies face a challenge of “technological populism”, which they attribute partly to the field of STS (see also Collins & Evans 2002; 2007; 2019; Collins, Weinel & Evans 2017). For several decades, STS scholars have studied the "Problem of Legitimacy," where scientific experts exceed their expertise. However, they have overlooked the corresponding “Problem of Extension” – that is, the “tendency to dissolve the boundary between experts and the public so that there are no longer any grounds for limiting the indefinite extension of technical decision-making rights” (2002: p. 235). Without clear demarcation criteria, we have no way of differentiating between the proper place for expertise vis-à-vis that of non-expert citizens. Without such criteria, we are now facing “an epistemological leveling-out in which science is no longer the preeminent source of knowledge about the world” (2019: p. 82). Collins and Evans therefore contend that STS scholars must acknowledge that overextension is the more urgent problem today. The priority for a future research agenda should therefore be to develop a new normative theory of expertise that delineates the boundaries of both expert and public influence over policy, “which can be used to argue against both an excessive reliance on science and an unrestrained suspicion of expertise” (2019: p. 79, italics in original). The hesitancy among STS scholars to initiate a principled debate about the limits of public involvement, they warn, is not only unjustified from a theoretical point of view but could also exacerbate “exactly
the skepticism about experts and other elites that now dominates political debate in the US and elsewhere” (Collins, Wein, & Evans 2017: p. 580).

In contrast, the procedural approach holds that politicization is not inherently problematic. The problem is not that science has become politicized, but that it is the wrong kind of politics. As previously discussed, the procedural approach rejects the notion that science and democracy belong to two separate realms. Rather, both activities embody the concept of an experimental process of social inquiry (Dewey, 1927/2016). Thus, in the procedural approach, the idea that democratic politics and scientific knowledge must be separated by a principled boundary is replaced with a notion of critical interaction (Habermas 1971: p. 66). Democracy is more than just an institutionalized procedure of decision-making; it is a way of life that encapsulates the logic of the experiment. “It is the hypothesis, if not the belief, that if man creates the proper institutions, then his better possibilities will actualize themselves” (Nathanson 1951: p. 83). Consequently, the contemporary crisis is not just a crisis of expertise but equally a crisis of democracy, and the remedy must be found in institutional solutions rather than analytical ones. Public skepticism toward scientific expertise and the erosion of trust in representative institutions are symptoms of the same malaise: the failure of modern democratic societies to facilitate inclusive and rational public communication, while utilizing the best available methods of inquiry. Accordingly, the focus should not be on devising new normative criteria for demarcation but on exploring institutional designs that can enhance the quality of public discourse. The task for political theory, therefore, is to develop new theories of institutional design that can clarify the mechanisms involved in promoting critical and rational communication between experts and non-experts.

The procedural approach regards public scrutiny and critique as constitutive components of the authority relation between experts and non-experts. This conception of authority has been developed and defended by Mark Warren (1996). Warren acknowledges that the 20th century has witnessed repeated rebellions against public authorities. In the late 1960s, students revolted against state authorities and protested social injustices, racism, and the Vietnam War. In more recent years, movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and Extinction Rebellion have organized similar acts of civil disobedience. Overall, citizens have become more inclined to question existing social and political structures and hierarchies. However, Warren rejects the conclusion that this trend amounts to a general crisis of authority. This interpretation, he contends, “obscures the extent to which the challenges amount to demands that institutions justify their authority in terms of their central activities and goods” (p. 59). Public calls for authorities to justify themselves and their activities are not an assault. Rather, they should be welcomed as opportunities for renewal:
To be sure, authorities are increasingly challenged, but more often than not they are being asked to specify their authority in terms of the goods they ought to serve. This is a pluralization and specification of authority, not a general crisis. Established authorities are unsettled, but more open [sic] than not, just to the extent that domains of their authority are not justifiable. When differentiations and specifications are demarcated, justified, and defended successfully, institutions and their authority are strengthened, not weakened (Warren 1996: p. 59).

According to scholars advocating for a procedural approach to expertise, authority and public contestation are not inherently irreconcilable. “[T]here is no problem in principle with dependence on science within democratic politics” (Moore 2018: p. 642, italics in original). Correspondingly, politicization of expertise is not problematic in principle. Both Warren and Moore insist that the boundaries of politics are themselves a political question. ‘The political’ is not an essence that can be analytically defined; rather, the space of politics is inevitably subject to challenge and renegotiation over time. It is therefore too sweeping to interpret the present crisis as reflecting the modern politicization of science, as political conflicts over science may represent legitimate and reasonable demands for public authorities to justify their claims and actions with arguments accessible and acceptable to the general public.

The proponents of the procedural approach do not deny that modern democracies are currently experiencing some form of crisis. According to their interpretation, the crisis reveals flaws in the existing institutional infrastructure of democracy. The issue is not that politics has become “too expertized” or that knowledge has become “too politicized”. Rather, the problem lies in the apparent inability of modern democratic societies to cater for a rational and inclusive process of public reasoning. This process must be both critical and cooperative, and, most importantly, it must embody the experimental spirit that bestows legitimacy on both democratic decisions and scientific knowledge.

What, then, would a constructive relationship between experts and citizens look like? According to Gutmann and Thompson (2004), a constructive relationship between experts and non-experts must involve "a certain amount of trust, but not blind trust" (p. 146, italics added). They suggest that citizens can have reasonable trust in experts if two conditions are fulfilled. First, citizens should have some independent basis, other than authority, for judging expert claims (e.g., a past record of sound judgments). Second, the experts should also be able to provide a publicly accessible account of how they arrived at their conclusions (ibid). Transparency and institutional mechanisms for holding experts accountable allow citizens to have reasonable faith in their authority.

However, Lisa Herzog (2023) warns against an exaggerated emphasis on expert accountability. “If ‘accountability’ is understood as control by indicators, it can all too easily degenerate into a tick-the-box exercise, or even distort
the practices it is supposed to hold to account” (p. 226). Too much control and scrutiny "not only take away valuable time and energy from experts but often alienate them from their tasks and undermine their intrinsic motivation" (pp. 226-227). She also observes that calls for expert accountability can be exploited by actors who seek to obfuscate rather than enlighten, and who seek to manipulate public opinion to serve their own interests or political agenda (pp. 227-228). According to Herzog, experts should be understood as neither trustees nor delegates. Experts and those who rely on them are better conceived of as 'partners' (ch. VIII). The partnership model involves both mutual trust and mutual responsibilities. For example, Herzog suggests that expert communities are responsible for providing the public with high-quality knowledge and to help citizens distinguish real experts from phonies, hence empowering their ability to resist manipulation. In turn, citizens and politicians have a responsibility in protecting science and academic research from the dysfunctional incentives that are created from an excessive reliance on market competition (pp. 231-240).

Similarly, Simone Chambers (2017; 2021) also argues that institutional mechanisms are insufficient to establish a constructive relationship between experts and non-experts. This relationship must also be guided by the right kind of ethos. Chambers proposes that experts ought to commit to an ethos of respect for the personal autonomy of each citizen (2017: p. 274). Citizens, in turn, are morally obliged to cultivate 'virtues of accuracy', which include, among other things, "a goodwill effort to find out what is true or to acquire true belief" (2021: p. 159).

Overall, theorists who defend a more procedural approach to expertise tend to be favorably disposed to participatory institutional innovations such as consensus conferences (see e.g., Fischer 2003), deliberative polls (Fishkin 2018), or other forms of mini publics, selected by lot or by some cleverly designed algorithm to ensure representability (see Warren 2021). The idea behind such innovations is that democracy could be revitalized by injecting an element of participatory democracy into the existing system of representative institutions. Moreover, the hope is that the mini public could accommodate a more enlightened process of public opinion formation than what is possible at the macro-level.

Others are more skeptical. For instance, Cristina Lafont (2019) criticizes the belief that mini publics and other “lottocratic” institutions could provide a shortcut to enhancing democratic legitimacy (ch. 4). This attempt to improve democracy, she argues, only reproduces the problem it purports to solve. A democratic problem always exists when citizens are required to blindly defer to an authority of some kind, no matter whether this authority is vested in the political elite, the experts, or a group of randomly selected citizens (pp. 123-134). There is no democratic way to bypass the legitimacy-producing process of opinion formation in the public realm. The implication is that the promise of democratic revitalization can be realized only if the deliberative processes
that take place at the micro level can somehow be brought to bear on the de-
liberative quality of the macro-level conversation (pp. 134-137). In the final
analysis, the problem that democrats must address is how to realize a process
of opinion-formation that can connect the people with its government, and
how to protect the democratic spirit of openness and experimentalism from
being skewed by strategic considerations.

3 The Recommended Role for Experts

Finally, the two approaches generate two different conceptions of the role for
experts in democracy. According to the instrumental approach, experts serve
an important role in democracy as gatekeepers. Scientists and academics pos-
sess knowledge relevant for navigating political debates and decisions, and
this knowledge is to some extent inaccessible to citizens in general. The sheer
complexity of modern society and the vast amount of socially available
knowledge make it difficult, if not impossible, for non-expert citizens to dis-
tinguish scientific knowledge claims from unscientific or politically biased
information. Thus, in the contemporary public realm, citizens rely on experts
as gatekeepers. The democratic role of experts is to guard the boundary be-
tween knowledge and politics, thereby protecting the public realm from harm-
ful politicization. In their public vocation, thus, the experts must serve as “a
kind of filter that separates out theories that have some substantial support
within the expert community from those that do not” (Christiano 2012: p. 36).
Such gatekeeping is crucial not only to enable democratic governments to
make scientifically informed decisions, but also to preserve the democratic
character of public opinion-formation. Without a clear boundary to separate
knowledge from politics, the epistemic foundation of democracy will eventu-
ally begin to erode. Citizens depend on the experts’ support to distinguish sci-
etically robust knowledge claims from politically biased descriptions of re-
ality. Without this support, they are unable to effectively exercise their demo-
cratic rights. Therefore, democracy need experts to protect the epistemic con-
ditions under which democratic values like accountability and legitimate
opposition can be realized. While the experts may not be able to provide con-
clusive answers for how to solve political problems, they nevertheless play a
crucial role in sustaining the boundaries of reasonable disagreement in the
democratic public realm.

The instrumental approach holds that expert gatekeeping is necessary to
protect the public realm from harmful politicization. Yet, gatekeeping is also
potentially problematic from a democratic standpoint. By granting experts the
authority to guard the boundary between politics and knowledge, citizens are
essentially at their mercy. They must trust that the experts do not abuse their
position of authority, and unless they become experts themselves, their defer-
ence will be based on blind trust. Thus, the instrumental approach not only
generates a conception of expertise as a democratic vocation but also as a potential threat. If experts are to serve as gatekeepers and guard the boundary between knowledge and politics in the public realm, how can citizens ensure that they do not betray their trust? The problem with expertise, on this account, is essentially a matter of ensuring expert accountability and protecting the space for reasonable disagreement. The instrumental approach emphasizes the democratic significance of expert gatekeeping; however, it also calls our attention to the possibility that experts could misuse their position of authority. This suggests that future research should focus on developing new institutional theories about the mechanisms needed to mitigate bias and ensure "that experts are really experts and that they use their competencies in the right way" (Holst & Molander 2017: p. 236; see also Pielke 2008; Pamuk 2021). At the same time, complete transparency seems like an objective that is impossible to reconcile with the conception of experts as gatekeepers. As Onora O’Neill (2014) asserts, there is a real tension between informed and independent judgment: "[t]here is an old saying that those who know cannot judge fairly, while those who can judge fairly know too little to provide an informed judgment" (pp. 184-185). Although this tension should not be exaggerated, it highlights the problem yielded by the instrumental approach: How can we ensure expert accountability, while granting them sufficient authority to efficiently perform their role as gatekeepers in the public realm?

The procedural approach yields a different conception of the role for experts in democracy. On this account, the democratic role of experts is not to guard an analytically defined boundary between knowledge and politics but to assist the critical interaction between the realm of science and the realm of politics. To promote a rational and inclusive public conversation, experts must assume the role of “a facilitator of public learning and empowerment” (Fischer 1993: p. 171, italics added). As facilitators, the experts must do more than merely inform citizens about relevant scientific facts and theories. They must also empower citizens to contest scientific descriptions of reality, and they must take such challenges seriously. The goal should not merely be to promote a one-sided public uptake of science, but to equally promote the academic uptake of non-scientific concerns and experiences. Thus, in some sense, the procedural conception of the expert vocation can be understood as a form of help to self-help. The experts support democracy by bringing scientific perspectives to interact with the perspectives of laypersons in a rational process of public opinion-formation. To facilitate a process of this kind, experts must make scientific facts and findings publicly available and educate citizens about their methods of inquiry. However, public learning is a two-way street. The experts must be responsive to the experiences, concerns, and situated knowledge of non-expert citizens. In their democratic vocation, they should work to facilitate a reciprocal process of public learning, a process that gives citizens the opportunity to learn from science, and which also gives science the opportunity to learn from the public.
The procedural approach holds that experts serve a crucial role in the democratic public realm by facilitating a rational process of opinion formation. However, like the instrumental approach, it also enables us to see how expertise can be turned against itself. As facilitators, the experts are in a position to frame the issue under consideration in a way that privileges some interpretations and conclusions over others. This problem is addressed by Chambers (2017), who stresses that framing is inevitably part of all communication and not necessarily a means for manipulation. The ability of experts to frame public debates about issues like climate change is not problematic in itself. In fact, "[f]raming is exactly what epistemic elites are supposed to do in the two-way responsiveness of considered public opinion formation. Framing brings epistemic clarity and presents issues in a form that can elicit a yes or no response" (p. 273). Neither is it necessarily a problem when frames are partisan rather than neutral. For example, "[g]ay marriage activists pushed to change the frame of gay marriage debate from a partisan position" (ibid). Nevertheless, a democratic problem emerges when experts use framing strategically to manufacture consent. When experts use their epistemic privilege to push the public process of opinion formation in a given direction, this amounts to a violation of their moral obligation to respect the personal autonomy of each citizen (p. 274). Thus, framing can both enhance and harm the democratic character of the public process of opinion formation. The problem that emerges from the procedural approach is therefore how to distinguish genuine facilitation from a strategic use of scientific knowledge. In a democracy, how can we ensure that experts use their privileged position in the public realm to facilitate democratic self-government, and not to manipulate public opinion?

Table 1. Two normative approaches to expertise

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<th>Instrumental</th>
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<td>Basis of expert authority</td>
<td>Delivering knowledge</td>
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<td>Diagnosis of the crisis</td>
<td>Politicization of knowledge</td>
<td>Strategic use of knowledge</td>
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<td>Role for experts</td>
<td>Gatekeeper</td>
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To summarize, the two approaches outlined in this chapter offer contrasting perspectives on the normative basis of expert authority, the democratic problem reflected in the crisis, and the role of experts in the democratic public realm. The instrumental approach posits that a clear and principled boundary between knowledge and politics is essential to safeguard the epistemic foundation of democracy. While proponents of this approach recognize that the value-neutral conception of scientific expertise is untenable, they nevertheless stress the necessity of upholding a principled boundary between knowledge and politics. To paraphrase Judith Shklar (1989/1998), the important point for democracy is perhaps not where the line between knowledge and politics is drawn, as that it be drawn, and that it must under no circumstances be ignored or forgotten. According to the instrumental approach, the present crisis of expertise reflects the blurring of this boundary in the contemporary public realm. Politicization poses a threat to democracy by challenging the epistemic foundation of democratic opinion-formation. This illustrates democracy’s need for authoritative expert gatekeepers, who can sustain the boundary between politics and knowledge in the public realm.

In contrast, the procedural approach assumes a more flexible approach to the boundary between politics and knowledge. It is premised on the idea of science and democracy as co-original, each relying on the other for its public authority. Scientific experts can therefore sustain their authority in the public realm only by justifying their claims in response to public criticisms. The procedural approach interprets the contemporary crisis of expertise as symptomatic of the failure of modern democratic societies to foster an inclusive and rational process of public opinion-formation. The crisis therefore elucidates democracy’s need for expert facilitators, who can promote a rational, inclusive, and reciprocal exchange of arguments that bring scientific perspectives into dialogue with the views of non-expert citizens.

Critique: Against the Ethos of Containment

The two approaches both capture important aspects of the relationship between democracy and expertise, and they both elucidate real problems that may arise in relation to expert authority. The instrumental approach, for instance, alerts us to the substantive limits of expert authority. Experts have authority by virtue of their capacity to deliver knowledge to the public realm. Their position is tied to their knowledge and experience within a specific field of scientific research. Thus, when experts make strong claims about issues beyond their own area of expertise, the instrumental approach suggests that we should take their statements with a grain of salt. The procedural approach similarly assists us in identifying instances of misplaced authority. This approach alerts us to the risk that experts could use their epistemic privilege strategically, to steer the public conversation in a predetermined direction, or
to discredit perspectives based on personal experience. In other words, there is some truth to both the instrumental and the procedural approach.

Nonetheless, in this section, I will argue that the instrumental and the procedural approach both suffer from serious limitations. Thus far in this chapter, I have emphasized the differences between the two approaches. However, there are also significant similarities. Most notably, what they share is a fundamental belief that I will describe as the ethos of containment. What unites the two approaches is the underlying conviction that expertise is a force in democracy, which must be contained by rules or procedures. While both the instrumental and the procedural approaches acknowledge democracy’s need for expertise, they also underscore the risk that experts may misuse their authoritative position in the public realm, and that they must therefore be subject to democratic control. The notion that experts might misuse their privileged position in the public realm is not baseless. However, I argue that the conception of expert judgment as a rule-bound practice harbors risks of its own.

My first objection to the ethos of containment is that it diminishes the agency of experts in ways that may undermine their ability to push back against harmful politicization. This critique is directed at the instrumental approach, which advocates for the confinement of expertise through substantive rules. The instrumental approach posits that experts should exercise caution when offering advice or making assertions that extend beyond their scientific knowledge. Essentially, this approach suggests that experts should strive for neutrality and refrain from grounding their judgments in considerations that may be characterized as “political”. While experts, like all citizens, have a right to express their opinions publicly, they also hold a privileged position in the public realm. Unlike ordinary citizens, experts speak from a position of authority. According to the instrumental approach, experts have authority in virtue of their capacity to deliver objective knowledge to the public realm. However, they can justifiably invoke the authority of science only when they communicate their scientific views; their political views hold no greater authority than those of any other citizen. Therefore, when experts participate in public discussions about politically contested issues, they must be transparent about this distinction and take great care to separate their scientific viewpoints from their personal and ideological opinions.

The weakness of the instrumental approach, I argue, lies in its failure to consider the significance of the context in which experts claims are received. In the public realm, value-neutral knowledge claims are not automatically apolitical. In fact, I suggest that expert neutrality is not only unfeasible – it can also become counterproductive. Thus, when experts adhere strictly to scientific neutrality as their guiding principle, they diminish their own capacity to resist detrimental politicization.

Consider the example of climate change denial. The campaign against climate science not only entails explicit denial of scientific facts. It also involves exaggerating the uncertainty of climate science and conveying unwarranted
skepticism about anthropogenic climate change (see e.g., Dunlap 2013). In this context, expert neutrality can easily become counterproductive. If the experts perceive themselves as neutral conveyers of knowledge, who should disseminate scientific facts and findings but leave their more political interpretation to be made by others, there is a considerable risk that they could end up lending their authority to political actors who will welcome the opportunity to exploit their name and credentials to advance their own agenda.

The instrumental approach interprets the crisis as illustrating a failure to sustain a clear and principled boundary between knowledge and politics. Our contemporary predicament therefore highlights democracy’s need for expert gatekeepers, who can guard the distinction between fact and opinion in the public realm. As gatekeepers, the experts must take great care to distinguish their scientific judgments from their personal and political views, particularly when addressing politically salient issues. To maintain their authority, they must try to distance themselves from the political struggle and focus on their core mission: to clarify the scientific basis of the discussion.

This conception, I argue, wrongly assumes that the epistemic foundation can be defined in isolation from the political context in which knowledge is disseminated. When experts address issues that are politically charged and contested, they cannot maintain neutrality by distancing themselves from political considerations. In fact, they can only effectively resist ideologically skewed interpretations of knowledge if they actively consider the political narratives that circulate in the public realm. The public uptake of expert claims is shaped by the surrounding political context. For example, an expert who agrees to be interviewed by the conspiracy theorist and alt-right radio host Alex Jones, and who dutifully answers his questions about the remaining uncertainties and methodological problems of climate science, does not merely act as a neutral conveyor of knowledge. In such a scenario, it does not matter whether the expert is driven by good intentions, or whether the answers are justifiable from a strictly scientific point of view. By failing to reflect on the context in which these answers are received, and on how they could be interpreted and used politically, the expert unwittingly becomes complicit in a conspiratorial scheme.

There is some truth to the instrumental approach. We have good reason to assume that the expert vocation corresponds with democracy’s need for objective and reliable knowledge. However, this need encompasses more than merely correct and unbiased information. Citizens and politicians turn to experts to gain scientifically informed perspectives on matters of common concern and to receive guidance on how to address them. In the public realm, the concern is ultimately with action. Therefore, what the experts provide is not just “knowledge” but “knowledge for action” (see Jasanoff 2015). The public uptake of knowledge is inevitably filtered through the political narratives that already shape our understanding of the world. In many instances, there is no neutral ground, strictly speaking. Even if the experts meticulously adhere to
an ideal of scientific objectivity, and even if they only communicate claims supported by scientific evidence, those who watch and listen still do so from the horizon of their prior understanding. This horizon, which enables us to make sense of new information, is not neutral but shaped by narratives that help us “connect the dots”. Thus, even if experts strive for neutrality and objectivity, the public interpretations of their claims will inevitably be colored by the context in which they appear and the political narratives they align with.

Expert neutrality is an unattainable ideal. This argument has been made before. For instance, Zeynep Pamuk (2021) contends that there exists an inherent tension between the neutrality and usefulness of expertise. As Pamuk rightly notes, expert advice is useful only to the extent that it assists decision-makers in defining and achieving their goals. Judgments about ends and values are therefore necessary, as are judgments about risks and uncertainties. Expert advice therefore entails an inevitable trade-off between neutrality and utility. Pamuk characterizes this as “the paradox of scientific advice” (ch. 3).

However, what I argue is not only that neutrality is unattainable but that it can also become counterproductive. When experts strive for neutrality, there is a considerable risk that they could end up exacerbating exactly the type of harmful politicization that they are commissioned to oppose. In public discourse, facts are likely to attract attention only when they carry significance and relevance – when they assist our understanding of the issue under consideration or inform potential responses to it. Facts that lack such utility are beside the point. If the experts refrain from addressing politically contested issues – for instance, if they prefer to speak about scientific facts and theories that are politically inconsequential – they risk sacrificing their relevance. When experts deliver knowledge devoid of public significance, their claims will pass by more or less unnoticed. To make themselves heard in the public realm, they must elucidate the relevance of their knowledge and discuss its societal (and potentially political) implications. If they anticipate that their claims could be exploited by political narratives that they disagree with, they must actively resist such interpretations. Otherwise, they could end up lending their authority, unreflectively, to actors who find their “neutral” expertise useful for advancing their own political agenda.

Overall, the problem with the instrumental approach is that it relies on a reductive and decontextualized notion of expertise. It is guided by an ethos of containment in the sense that it perceives expert judgment as a rule-bound activity, thereby reducing the role of experts to that of an instrument, a tool in the hands of the political will. The instrumental approach correctly assumes that scientific knowledge is useful to politics. Indeed, scientific knowledge is a powerful instrument in modern societies. Not only is it useful in the administration and implementation of political decisions. It can also be appropriated and used as a source of legitimacy. However, the spirit of scientific neutrality that the instrumental approach recommends as a safeguard against politicization is inadequate, as it neglects the socio-political dynamics that shape our
interpretation of knowledge. The instrumental strategy can easily backfire. In the modern public realm, political actors participate in a competition for science to claim legitimacy for their policies and agendas. Unless the experts actively reflect on the political context in which they operate and assume an active role in the public interpretation of knowledge, they risk becoming passive collaborators, allowing themselves to be used by political forces. By recommending experts to distance themselves from the political narratives that mediate the public uptake of knowledge, the instrumental approach creates a void of meaning that is left to be exploited by others than the experts themselves.

If the experts resign from interpreting the meaning of the knowledge they bring to the public realm, this means that they leave this task to be carried out by others. The point is not that the experts should become activists. Rather, what I suggest is that they cannot effectively resist harmful politicization by prioritizing neutrality. In their public vocation, the experts must assume a more active role in discussing the meaning and implications of science and academic knowledge. If they are reluctant to do so – for instance, if they declare that they merely wish to “report the facts” – this should not be understood as a sign of democratic respect. Rather, it indicates a hesitancy to accept the responsibility that comes with their position of authority in the public realm.

My second objection to the ethos of containment is that it reduces the public conversation to its rational component. This argument is directed against the procedural approach, which posits that experts have a democratic role in facilitating a rational process of public opinion-formation. This approach understands democratic opinion-formation as (ideally) an inclusive, respectful, and egalitarian exchange of arguments. The role of experts in this process is not simply to “deliver” knowledge; rather, they facilitate the construction of public knowledge by scientific facts and perspectives into dialogue with the views and experiences of non-expert citizens. The procedural approach thus acknowledges the intersubjective character of public knowledge. However, by conceptualizing democratic opinion-formation as an exchange of arguments, governed by procedural norms of discourse, it fails to consider the conditions under which knowledge can attain a significant role in the public realm – the conditions that enable us to not only acknowledge scientific facts as valid but to also experience them as meaningful and real.

According to the procedural approach, the contemporary crisis highlights the distorting effects of strategic communication. The experimental spirit and communicative rationality of democracy are corrupted when scientific knowledge is strategically employed to steer the public conversation toward predetermined conclusions. When public opinion-formation is dominated by strategic rationality, it loses its authenticity and turns into a power struggle. This diagnosis of the crisis is not incorrect; however, I will try to show that it is incomplete.
The problem with the procedural approach is that it reduces democratic opinion-formation to its rational element. This makes it blind to the difference between acknowledging a claim as valid and recognizing it as meaningful and significant. As I have already suggested, even facts that are widely acknowledged as true and valid will nevertheless remain inconsequential unless they are also recognized as meaningful and relevant. Therefore, if experts play a role in supporting democratic opinion-formation, they should support the ability of citizens to recognize scientific knowledge claims (e.g., scientific facts) as meaningful assertions about a shared reality, which is not the same as establishing intersubjective validity. This critique emphasizes the need to re-think the meaning of democratic opinion-formation. It is insufficient, I suggest, to conceive democratic opinion-formation as a rational and respectful exchange of arguments because this conception obscures the conditions under which citizens can become willing and able to participate in such exchanges in the first place. It is insufficient, therefore, to consider the conditions under which public opinion can be rational; we must also address the prior issue of how to understand the conditions under which it can be experienced as meaningful.

Once again, let me use the example of climate change denial to illustrate my point. Climate change is a unique example: this is an issue that is both politically salient, significant, and where the scientific community is overwhelmingly in agreement. We know that human activities are driving climate change, and that severe consequences are inevitable unless radical measures are taken to reduce emissions and adapt society. Yet, despite the scientific consensus, parts of the public remain skeptical or indifferent to this knowledge. The public response, or lack thereof, to climate science therefore indicates a discrepancy in the public relationship between knowledge and politics.

From a proceduralist perspective, climate change denial illustrates the distortion that arises when the public conversation is infiltrated by strategic rationality. For example, public opinion can be manipulated by agents who exploit the uncertainty of science to sow doubt and prevent decisions that conflict with their political or economic interests. In response to the distorting influence of strategic rationality on public opinion-formation, it seems reasonable to advocate that citizens must be equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to critically evaluate public knowledge claims, as well as promoting opportunities for experts and citizens to participate jointly in communicative settings that are shielded from the pressures of partisan and commercial interests.

The procedural strategy seems productive; however, it has a weakness in that it appears to exaggerate the extent to which political opinions are based on rational considerations. The idea that climate change denial reflects a failure of rational communication appears to underestimate the extent to which such skepticism is rooted in resistance against the changes and losses entailed
by a societal transition to a more sustainable society. As Gil Eyal (2019) points out, “[n]obody disputes quantum mechanics, nor, for that matter, is any solid state physics discipline under assault” (p. 7). Scientific knowledge becomes an object of political contestation only when it carries political implications. Political struggles emerge wherever something is at stake – resources, values, identities, or interests.

The challenge posed by climate change denial extends beyond disinformation about science. Public resistance and uncertainty toward climate science are not necessarily the result of manipulation. Another possible interpretation is that the skeptics refuse to acknowledge climate change as a real threat because they feel that accepting this reality would bind them to political conclusions that are so intolerable or impossible to reconcile with their identities that they must simply deny it, even against their better knowledge. If this interpretation is correct, then it seems that a rational exchange of arguments, no matter how respectful and reciprocal, will nevertheless be insufficient to foster public awareness of climate change. An effective response must not only consider the norms of rational communication but also the circumstances under which inconvenient truths can be accepted and endured.

The distinction I propose between acknowledging a claim as valid and recognizing it as meaningful and real can be illustrated more clearly if we consider a different type of climate change denial: not blatant denial of climate science, but the much more widespread phenomenon of climate change indifference. After all, explicit denial is a relatively minor phenomenon. The majority of the world’s population now report that they acknowledge climate change as a fact (see UNDP 2021). Given the extensive acceptance of climate science, the political indifference and passivity appear quite puzzling. The political apathy and relative inattentiveness to this issue among political leaders and citizens are difficult to reconcile with the magnitude of this development. Arguably, the lack of political attention and activity among the majority is even more puzzling than the more explicit skepticism that continues to exist among a minority of the population.

Public indifference to climate change indicates that the problem is not solely epistemic. People know that the climate is changing, and they are informed about the consequences of this development. Still, even those who acknowledge this fact seem somehow incapable of reacting appropriately. One possible explanation for the political inaction is, of course, that it reflects the costs of political cooperation. What we have, then, is essentially a classic collective action problem: individuals fail to cooperate, even though they know that cooperation is in their best interest, because their individual interests discourage them from doing so. This is certainly one aspect of the issue. However, this interpretation cannot fully account for the public numbness because climate change indifference not only involves a failure to act but also a failure to react appropriately to what we know. Even people who have no desire whatsoever to contest the claims of climate scientists can nonetheless remain
emotionally detached from them, unable to perceive this knowledge as relevant to a shared reality that demands their response.

The failure of democratic publics to respond appropriately to climate science highlights the distinction between validity and meaning. Even a perfectly rational exchange of arguments, meeting all procedural criteria for rational communication, would still be meaningless if the participants experienced the conversation as purely hypothetical – if they experienced it as a seminar discussion or a mere intellectual exercise, rather than a discussion about their shared reality. Therefore, even if the public process of opinion-formation would satisfy all necessary and sufficient conditions for attaining a rational consensus, it could still fail to provide us with the type of context where scientific facts can be recognized as meaningful references to a shared reality, and where we, as citizens, can come to identify with the demands that they place on us.

**Conclusion**

The two approaches examined in this chapter reflect two different conceptions of public reason. The instrumental and the procedural approach are conducive in that they help us address important aspects of the relationship between knowledge and politics, and to identify democratic problems that emerge when expert authority fails or is misused. There is merit to both these approaches. Nonetheless, I have argued that they suffer from serious limitations.

Despite their differences, the two approaches share an “ethos of containment”, i.e., an elementary belief that expertise must be contained by rules or procedures to be compatible with democracy. This notion, I have argued, can create problems of its own. When expertise is approached as a rule-bound activity, as in the instrumental approach, there is a risk that the experts could resign from the task of actively interpreting the meaning of their knowledge, and passively allow others to exploit their authority in a misplaced attempt to remain neutral and objective. Thus, the experts can only effectively counteract destructive politicization by assuming a more active role in the public interpretation of science and academic knowledge. As I have stressed, this means that they cannot form their judgments exclusively based on scientific considerations. They must also consider the context in which their knowledge is received and reflect on how their claims may be interpreted from different political horizons.

When expertise is approached as an activity bound by procedural norms of discourse, as in the procedural approach, the problem is that the focus remains exclusively on the rational component of democratic opinion-formation. Like the instrumental approach, the procedural approach proceeds from a Kantian notion of political legitimacy and conceives democratic opinion-formation through a framework of universal justification. Thus, according to the procedural approach, democratic opinion-formation is (ideally) a process governed
by the rational, respectful, and reciprocal exchange of reasons. However, as I have suggested, this conception overlooks the conditions under which citizens can experience such exchanges meaningful and significant. The challenge that confronts us in the contemporary crisis is not only how scientific facts can become acknowledged as valid but also how they can become recognized as meaningful and real. The ability of citizens to experience scientific knowledge claims as meaningful references to a common reality cannot be taken for granted. As I have suggested, the example of climate change indifference demonstrates that it is possible to remain indifferent and numb even to facts that one acknowledges as true. Even knowledge that is widely acknowledged as correct and important in an objective sense can therefore be experienced as distant and remote, devoid of any real meaning.

The critical examination undertaken in this chapter indicates that the present crisis of expertise cannot be understood solely as reflecting a problem of public reason. What the crisis illustrates is not merely the failure of the contemporary public realm to satisfy the instrumental and/or procedural requirements of universal justification. It also appears to reflect a condition of alienation: an inability to see the meaning of knowledge or to even experience it as real, and an inability to identify with the demands that it places on us. This aspect of the crisis is overlooked by both the instrumental and the procedural approach. These approaches view the democratic problem as a matter of rational adjudication: how to distinguish reasonable and legitimate claims from unreasonable and illegitimate ones? This is a valid question, but it is not the only issue involved in the crisis. The crisis also prompts reflection on how to maintain a meaningful connection to the common world. Under what conditions can democratic opinion-formation be not only rational but also meaningful? And what role does expertise play in supporting the meaningfulness of democratic discourse? In response to these questions, the two existing approaches have no normative guidance to offer. This gap in our theoretical understanding of the relationship between democracy and expertise demonstrates the need to develop a new, complementary approach. This approach must consider the existential – not just the epistemic or rational – conditions for democratic opinion-formation, and it must articulate a role for experts that corresponds not only with democracy’s need for knowledge but also with the need for democratic publics to extract meaning from knowledge.
Chapter 3
Hannah Arendt and the Modern Predicament

Expertise is an important source of legitimacy in modern democratic societies. This means that expertise not only serves a role in the administration of political decisions but also that political actors vie for scientific knowledge to claim legitimacy for their ideas and policies. Thus, expertise is at once our primary source of authoritative knowledge and a significant arena for political contention. Even though expertise abounds in the contemporary public realm, the promise of science to generate certainty and agreement is left unfulfilled. This means that citizens can no longer take the expert view for granted. Instead, they are now under pressure to become experts themselves, “experts on experts”.

In the previous chapter, I examined the two currently predominant approaches that govern our normative understanding of expertise in democracy. These approaches derive from a classic debate in political theory: the debate on public reason. In the contemporary literature on public reason, a basic distinction can be made between the two main theoretical perspectives, one being more instrumental and the other more procedural. As I have shown, these perspectives generate different answers to three questions: how to understand the normative basis for expert authority, how to diagnose the contemporary crisis, and how to understand the role of experts in democracy.

The instrumental and the procedural approach elucidate important aspects of the relationship between knowledge and politics, and they are both conducive in that they help us identify real problems that arise when expert authority fails or is misused. Nonetheless, I have argued that they suffer from serious limitations. The two approaches both conceive the contemporary crisis as reflecting a problem of rational adjudication. This interpretation obscures the more existential dimension of our contemporary predicament. The issue, I suggest, is not only how to rationally adjudicate between competing claims but also how to maintain a meaningful relationship to our shared reality. The limitations of the two existing approaches therefore demonstrate the need to develop a new perspective on expertise in democracy – a perspective that moves beyond the framework of universal justification.

In this chapter, I will take the first steps toward developing a new, more existential approach to expertise in democracy. In this endeavor, I will turn to Hannah Arendt’s critique of modernity to see how it can help us develop a
new interpretation of the contemporary crisis of expertise. What I will show is that Arendt can help us see the crisis in a new light. When the crisis is perceived through an Arendtian lens, it no longer appears to reflect the problem of how to rationally distinguish legitimate knowledge claims from illegitimate ones. Rather, it now appears to reflect the resignation that accompanies the modern condition of world alienation.

Arendt characterizes the modern condition, somewhat vaguely, as “the loss of the world”. In modernity, human beings are struggling “to be at home in the world”, which for Arendt signifies the challenge of “coming to terms with and reconciling ourselves to reality” (EU: p. 308). This sense of displacement and disorientation depletes our ability to cope constructively with uncertainty. Without the stability and continuity provided by a common world, the individual is thrown back on herself and her subjective experiences. What is threatened in this state of world alienation is not only our sense of agency and meaning but also our very sense of reality. In a state of alienation, what appears most real is no longer the facts and events of the world but the ideas and emotions that preoccupy our inner realms. In this condition of estrangement from the word, the primary risk is not that citizens could go wrong in their judgments but that they could resign from judging at all.

Arendt’s analysis of the modern predicament, I suggest, offers a lens through which to interpret the contemporary crisis of expertise. According to the Arendtian interpretation, the problem that confronts us in this crisis is not primarily that public opinion is being distorted by politicization or strategic rationality. The more fundamental issue is the alienation of public discourse from its very object – the common world. Instead of providing a shared context from which to examine and discuss the world in its various aspects, the modern public realm has inverted, and is now consumed by the inner lives of its individual members. Without a shared context to ground our common sense, the burden of judgment becomes humanly unbearable. Thus, according to the Arendtian diagnosis of the crisis, the issue is not so much that citizens could fail in their new role as “experts on experts”. The more fundamental risk is that they could end up forsaking this role completely.

In what follows, I will begin by accounting for Arendt’s narrative about modernity and clarifying her concept of freedom. In the bulk of the chapter, I will examine Arendt’s analysis of modernity by unpacking her concept of world alienation. This concept, I suggest, can be understood as comprised by three elements: loss of stability, loss of belonging, and loss of common sense. In the final part, I will return to the contemporary crisis of expertise and discuss how Arendt’s notion of world alienation can elucidate our present predicament. By applying Arendt’s analysis of modernity to the contemporary crisis, I will explicate what it means to interpret it in more existential terms: as reflecting the problem of how to endure the burdens of modern democratic citizenship.
Before turning to Arendt’s analysis of modernity, however, let me begin with a brief note on interpretation. Arendt has often been read as an anti-modernist or even a nostalgic political thinker (see, for instance, O’Sullivan 1973). Some critics argue that Arendt’s admiration for the ancient world led her to adopt an outdated view of politics. Conversely, others contend that she should be read as a “reluctant modernist” (Benhabib 2000). However, I propose that Arendt cannot be neatly fitted into either category. My interpretation is in this regard influenced by Margaret Canovan (1992), who argues that Arendt’s critique of modernity was motivated by her urge to come to terms with the major political event of her own time. Her critique was not born out of a fascination with Athens, but from her experience of totalitarianism. Arendt was convinced that the rise of Nazism and Stalinism in the 1930s introduced us to an entirely unprecedented, and hence distinctly modern form of government. Therefore, we can fully grasp Arendt’s critical perspective on modernity only by situating it within the historical context of her work: to read it as part of her attempt to come to terms with totalitarianism.

Modernity – Arendt’s Narrative

The two approaches examined in Chapter 2 both embody a neo-Kantian notion of the democratic public realm as (ideally) a domain of reason. This perspective conceives the democratic public realm as the production site of political legitimacy, linking political decision-making to a public process of rational deliberation. Neo-Kantians such as Rawls and Habermas view the public realm as having a legitimizing role in democracy – the public realm enables a political order grounded on universal reason. What these theorists share is the basic assumption that political rules and decisions are legitimate only if they are justifiable to all (reasonable) individuals who are subject to them. This notion of legitimacy mirrors Kant’s categorical imperative, which posits that humans are morally obligated to follow the dictates of their own reason.

The conviction that a legitimate political order must rely on a foundation of universal reason encapsulates the Enlightenment project. Historically, the Enlightenment spanned the late 17th to the early 19th century and marked a period of profound scientific, philosophical, and political development. In more philosophical terms, it marks the beginning of what Kant famously described as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (1784/2009: p. 1). According to the classic Enlightenment narrative, the breakdown of traditional society liberated humanity from the bonds of external authority. In modernity, individuals have been granted the freedom to make up their own mind about right and wrong. They are now trusted with the responsibility to follow their own understanding to the best of their ability. This newfound freedom is not limited to the individual but extends to the collective intellectual capacity of humanity. The promise of the new era was not just individual freedom but also progress. This optimism about modernity was premised on a
belief in the emancipatory potential of human reason. Other things being equal, reason guides us toward what is true and right rather than to what is false and unjust, and we may therefore anticipate that the public application of reason will lead to progress – not only in the realm of science but also in morality and politics (see Gaus 2003: ch. 1).

As we have seen, contemporary theorists like Rawls and Habermas have adopted a more moderate understanding of reason and the extent of universality and progress that can be achieved through the public application of reason. These theorists do not expect public reason to foster unanimous agreement on an expanding body of universal moral and political truths. The point, rather, is to establish the boundaries of reasonable disagreement, or to lay down the norms of reasonable discourse. According to Gaus, much of the contemporary literature on public reason can be viewed as part of a ‘post-Enlightenment project’. The objective of this intellectual project remains the construction of a universal foundation for politics; however, this foundation must align with the realities of modern society and acknowledge pluralism as a permanent feature of democratic life (Gaus 2003: pp. 26-27).

Arendt’s political thought diverges from the aim and premises of the post-Enlightenment project. Her narrative about modernity radically contrasts with that which guides the contemporary literature on public reason. In Arendt’s view, modernity does not signify the dawn of human freedom and emancipation. The breakdown of traditional hierarchies has indeed liberated us from the shackles of the past. However, for Arendt, this release from tradition and authority is profoundly ambivalent. What it means is essentially that we have lost our “banisters”, the safe and reliable guideposts for navigating into the future. Without these banisters, we now find ourselves “out it the

10 In a recent contribution, Samuel Moyn (2023) challenges the standard interpretation of Arendt as an idiosyncratic thinker by placing her work in the context of Cold War liberalism. While acknowledging that Arendt’s political thought differs in important respects from that of her liberal contemporaries (“Arendt wasn’t a liberal, she repeatedly declared – and she was therefore not a Cold War liberal” (p. 534)), Moyn nevertheless argues that her attempt at “developing a new account of freedom proved hostage to many of the intellectual and political premises of Cold War liberalism” (ibid). What he posits is that Arendt’s political and theoretical outlook is essentially marred by the problems as those which apply to the intellectual contributions of liberals like Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, and Jacob Talmon. On his account, Arendt’s political thought is fundamentally conservative and Eurocentric – racist, even – and its relevance for our time is therefore considerably limited. Against this interpretation, I argue that we can only properly understand the nature of Arendt’s contribution by acknowledging that she rejects progressivism on entirely different grounds than those that undergird the conservative liberal that Moyn criticizes. As I emphasize in this chapter, Arendt’s notion of freedom must be understood as distinct from both the more “progressive” notion of freedom as political self-determination and the more “conservative” notion of freedom as limited government. By neglecting such central premises, Moyn fails to appreciate the emancipatory impetus of Arendt’s political thought.
cold” \textit{(TWB: p. 473)}. Modern human beings have lost their faith in heaven and hell – and without this faith in a higher authority, they are left to manage the burden of judgment on their own.

In Arendt’s storytelling, the loss of tradition and authority in the modern era, and the individualism that has arisen in its stead, do not automatically amount to emancipation. Instead, the modern age confronts us with an existential problem: how to endure freedom, despite its great costs. The modern world, Arendt contends, has not realized its promise of emancipation. Rather than ushering in a new era of enlightenment, modernity has entailed what she terms “dark times” (see \textit{MDT}). Arendt’s notion of dark times does not refer to the genocides, expulsions, or any of the other specific horrors of the 20th century. What the expression signifies, rather, is “the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden” (Berkowitz 2009: p. 3). In dark times, public speech loses its ability to illuminate the common world, so that “everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the power of ‘mere talk’ that irresistibly arises out of the public realm” (\textit{MDT}: p. ix). In other words, “dark times”, in Arendt’s vocabulary, refers to the modern loss or disfigurement of the public realm, the realm that serves to make the world visible to its inhabitants and assist them in their efforts to make sense of their shared reality.

Freedom and Uncertainty in Arendt

Arendt’s concept of freedom lies at the heart of her political philosophy. She defines freedom as the human capacity to begin – “to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known” \textit{(BPF: p. 150)}. The freedom to begin is rooted in two basic aspects of our human condition. The first aspect is human plurality, “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” \textit{(HC: p. 7)}. The second is the human faculty of action, which “in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin […] to set something in motion” (p. 177). While the potential for freedom is inherent to human existence, human beings are not free “by nature”. Arendt’s concept of freedom is not ontological or natural; rather, it is a worldly experience, and as such, it can be lost. It is precisely this freedom that Arendt sees threatened in the modern world.

Arendt’s notion of freedom becomes clearer when contrasted with other familiar conceptions: freedom as inner freedom, freedom as negative freedom, and freedom as free will. Let me therefore clarify the meaning of Arendtian freedom by discussing how it differs from these three alternative perspectives.

First, Arendtian freedom can be contrasted with the Stoicist notion of freedom as an inner, solitary experience. According to the Stoics, freedom is
something individuals can attain by withdrawing to their “inner citadel”\footnote{The metaphor of the inner citadel was used by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 a.c.) to describe the untouchability of the soul. “Things cannot touch the soul. They have no access to the soul. They cannot produce our judgments. They are outside of us. They themselves know nothing, and by themselves they affirm nothing” (see Hadot 1998: p. 105).}. By training oneself to relinquish impossible desires and accepting one’s fate regardless of its disappointments, human beings can gain the freedom to be the master of their own soul. This notion of freedom suggests that while individuals cannot control the events of the external world, they can learn to control their own reactions to them. However, as Isaiah Berlin (1969/2002: pp. 182-187) argues, it is difficult to see how the stoic way of life could lead to the enlargement of freedom in the world. This conception of freedom is apolitical, suggesting that freedom is best achieved by withdrawing from the world into the soul – the inner realm inaccessible to others, and where nothing can touch us.

Arendt’s concept of freedom stands in stark opposition to this view, which holds freedom to be ultimately incompatible with life among other people. According to Arendt, all concepts originate from experience (LMT: pp. 86-87), and the idea of freedom as an inner experience could not have arisen unless we had first experienced freedom together with others (BPF: p. 147). The introspection that Arendt sees as characteristic of modernity is therefore not a means to attain authentic freedom but rather symbolizes the modern experience of world alienation. When individuals retreat into their inner realm, to shield themselves from the world and the people in it, this is not a path to authentic freedom but rather a response to the absence of freedom in the world (p. 145). Thus, unlike the common liberal understanding of freedom as an experience that belongs to individuals in their private lives – that is, a freedom from politics – Arendtian freedom is public and political at its core. The freedom to begin can only exist in a world inhabited by human beings in the plural, and new beginnings are inherently political as they have the potential to change the world in which they appear. To begin, Arendt asserts, is to “insert” oneself into the world for sake of transforming it (HC: pp. 176-177). Arendtian freedom is therefore an experience that is unattainable to individuals in isolation. It is a freedom that is inherently political – indeed, as Arendt contends, this freedom is the raison d’être of politics, “the reason that men live together in political organization at all” (ibid).

Second, Arendtian freedom must also be distinguished from liberation. Liberation is defined in the negative: it is the release from external constraints. We are liberated when the tyrant is overthrown, or when we are relieved from the necessary labor involved in sustaining bare life. Liberation is therefore “the condition of freedom, but by no means leads automatically to it” (OR: p. 22). In contrast with liberation, freedom must be constituted. On Arendt’s account, freedom requires the presence of others and “a place where people can
come together – the agora, the marketplace, or the polis, the political space proper” (ibid: p. 24). It is only by forming a body politic, “a politically guaranteed public realm” (*BPF*: p. 147), that freedom can become more than a momentary, fleeting experience. Freedom as a worldly reality, “a demonstrable fact” (ibid), depends for its existence on a politically constituted public realm where people can make their appearance through speech and deed.

This point about the need for freedom to be politically constituted is often lost in discussions about Arendt’s scholarship. Arendt has often been read as a revolutionary, even anarchic political thinker, who celebrate the extraordinary over the mundane business of normal politics (see Kateb 2000; Herzog 2004). For example, Georg Kateb (2000) writes that, for Arendt, “politics is all the more authentic when it is eruptive rather than when it is a regular and already institutionalized practice” (pp. 134-135). Eruption, he continues, is the clearest “manifestation of the peculiar human capacity to be free or spontaneous, to start something new and unexpected, to break with seemingly automatic or fated processes or continuities; in a word, to be creative” (p. 135).

This interpretation, I argue, is misguided. Arendt was not an anarchic thinker who preferred eruption over stability; in fact, she repeatedly insists on the need for a constituted public realm, and for institutions that can provide the stability that human beings need to be free. As suggested by Christian Volk (2015), we may even describe Arendt as a thinker of order, who assigns a central role to the concept of law. Arendt was no liberal, but neither was she an “illiberal”, or in any way opposed to legal guarantees for individual rights such as freedom of speech and assembly. The liberal ideal of limited government, she asserts, is not synonymous with freedom; however, “the distance between tyranny and constitutional, limited government is as great as, perhaps greater than, the distance between limited government and freedom” (*OR*: p. 220).

Third, Arendtian freedom must also be distinguished from freedom as free will. Her notion of freedom differs from both the autonomy of individuals and the sovereignty of political collectives to live according to the laws of their own making. Both autonomy and sovereignty are qualities of the will, i.e., “the *liberum arbitrium* […] that arbitrates and decides between two given things, one good and one evil, and whose choice is predetermined by motive which has only to be argued to start its operation” (*BPF*: p. 150). On Arendt’s account, such self-determination is “not a matter of freedom but a question of strength and weakness” (ibid). The will commands the execution of a given end, and its “freedom” consists in its ability to win over other, conflicting, wills, within other people or within one’s own self. Free will, in short, is a matter of control: self-control or sovereign control over others. As such, the autonomy of the will is a zero-sum game, and an autonomy of this kind “can be purchased only at the price of the freedom, i.e., the sovereignty, of all others” (ibid: p. 163). Arendt’s concept of freedom is distinctly non-sovereign.
Political freedom is in her sense not only different from but opposed to and inconsistent with the notion of political sovereignty:

Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the “general will” of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce (BPF: p. 163).

On Arendt’s account, freedom is not experienced through willing but through acting – and free acts, she argues, always “contain an element of virtuosity” (p. 152). What she means is that freedom is experienced in the very act of beginning something new, not in the execution of an end. The product of action, furthermore, is not end results but relationships. The faculty of action is revelatory: it is through action and speech that human beings disclose who they are, as opposed to what they are (HC: p. 179). It is only through (inter)action that relationships can be established and sustained (p. 190). The flipside of this relational quality of action is boundlessness. The actor, Arendt asserts, “is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer” (ibid). When we act, we initiate an event “where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes” (ibid). How the story unfolds will depend on the responses from other people, who also have the freedom to act and re-act. By implication, action is inherently unpredictable. The ending of the stories we initiate are always to some extent beyond our control. We cannot ever fully foresee the consequences of our deeds, and the meaning of the story in which we partake only fully reveals itself in hindsight. We cannot know where our actions will take us, or whether our initiatives will indeed succeed in bringing about something new. Hence, uncertainty is constitutive of freedom.

Summing up, Arendt’s concept of freedom contrasts with other familiar conceptions. Arendtian freedom differs from both negative and positive liberty. It is not negatively defined; it is not freedom from politics. However, it is also distinct from positive liberty, which involves the autonomy to pursue the ends of one’s choosing. Arendtian freedom differs from the conceptions bound in both the liberal tradition of political thought and the more republican

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12 Many scholars have placed Arendt within the republican tradition which holds freedom to consist in the enjoyment of non-domination secured by public participation – a conception of freedom that prioritizes the freedom of the ancients over the freedom of the moderns (see e.g., Habermas 1977; Canovan 1992: ch. 6; Euben 2000). This is not the interpretation that I will advance in this thesis. In contrast with the republican notion of freedom as non-domination, Arendtian freedom cannot be guaranteed only through law or popular participation; rather, it must be continuously enacted and affirmed. Arendtian freedom carries an element of virtuosity in that it comes into being through the very act of beginning. For a more thorough discussion of Arendt’s concept of freedom and how it deviates from republican conceptions, see Näsström 2021: ch. 3.
The Modern Predicament: World Alienation

Uncertainty is constitutive of freedom, and our relationship to freedom is therefore ambivalent. One of Arendt’s central insights is that freedom is not necessarily felt as freedom; it can also be an abysmal experience. The intuition that human beings can lose their appetite for freedom is important to consider as we now proceed to examine Arendt’s critical analysis of modernity. According to Arendt, it was in modernity that we first began to experience freedom as a problem. In the modern age, we have lost the traditional guideposts that used to offer us guidance for the future. The thread of tradition has broken. Without a past that can deliver authoritative instructions, we find ourselves confronted with Arendt’s abyss. The loss of historical continuity heightens the sense of uncertainty inherent in human affairs. Without the guidance of traditional guideposts, we must confront both past and future head-on. Or, as Arendt liked to cite Tocqueville: “Since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity” (see BPF: p. 5). The break with tradition has not only liberated us from its fetters but also left us in the dark, alone in our attempts to navigate into an uncertain future.  

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13 This point about the burden of freedom has recently been elaborated by Sofia Näsström (2021) who, drawing on Arendt, asserts that democracy is not only liberating but also highly
Without religion and tradition as our external guarantors of right, the burden of judgment falls on the shoulders of the individual. Arendt characterizes this as a moment of crisis. However, her political outlook is not conservative. Her point is not that we should seek to resurrect the authorities of the past—Her critique of modernity is not an expression of mourning for a paradise lost but must be understood as part of her attempt to come to terms with totalitarianism as an entirely unprecedented, and hence specifically modern, phenomenon. The rise of totalitarianism, she contends, “has usurped the dignity of our tradition” (OT: p. ix). This event was not only a political, moral, and humanitarian crisis. According to Arendt, it also introduced a crisis of understanding. Totalitarianism, she argues, has exploded our traditional political categories and standards of judgment (EU: p. 310). There is no turning back from this event, no way of restoring the tradition it destroyed, and “all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain” (OT: p. ix). Thus, as Margaret Canovan (1992) argues in her seminal reinterpretation of Arendt’s political thought, Arendt’s critique of modernity is not driven by nostalgia but by her urge to understand the rise of totalitarianism as a uniquely modern event. Understanding and judging this event was the crucial task for the post-war era, Arendt figured, because only then would it be possible to reconcile oneself with the world as the place where these regimes and their crimes could appear (see Kohn 2002).

The modern predicament, as Arendt understands it, involves world alienation, or what she describes more suggestively as “the loss of the world”. As we have already seen, Arendt rejects the assumption that human beings are free by nature. Freedom is not rooted in human nature but depends for its existence on a constituted public realm, a shared space where human beings can come together through speech and action. Freedom is for Arendt a worldly experience, and the ‘world’ denotes the world of human-made things that lie in between us. The world has the power to both connect and separate us at the same time (HC: p. 52), and it therefore serves to mitigate the inherent volatility of action by imparting stability to human affairs (p. 167). Modern world alienation is driven by what Arendt describes as “the two-fold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self” (p. 6). The modern inclination to transcend the limits of our human condition on the one hand, while withdrawing from the responsibilities of political coexistence, on the other, forms the basis of her critique. It is important to note that this notion of demanding. When the democratic revolution released us “from the weight of a divinely instituted right”, it simultaneously burdened us with “the task that comes with its overthrow, namely that of being the ultimate giver and guarantor of right” (p. 10). Arendt’s abyss of freedom, therefore, is equally an “abyss of responsibility”. The responsibility for how the future unfolds now falls upon the actions and judgments of human beings in the present. “There is no one else out there to praise or blame” (ibid).
alienation diverges from Marx’s more famous conception. For Arendt, the distinctly modern experience is characterized by estrangement from the world, not from one’s self, and this experience is not felt as an inability to identify with the products of one’s own work but is better understood as a form of loneliness and disorientation, an inability “to be at home in the world” (EU: p. 308).

Worldliness entails both a sense of belonging and a sense of responsibility. To be firmly attached to the world involves the comfort of familiarity – the ability to orient oneself and navigate within it. It also encompasses the inclination and capability to care for it, to give it priority – to even put it before one’s own self. Correspondingly, alienation from the world involves both a sense of deprivation and an incapacity to assume responsibility for it. At its most extreme, world alienation is experienced as loneliness: “the experience of not belonging to the world at all” (OT: p. 475). In what follows, I will unpack Arendt’s critique of modernity by examining three core dimensions of world alienation: loss of stability, loss of belonging, and loss of common sense.

Loss of Stability
The first central feature of worldliness is stability. In Arendt’s vocabulary, the ‘world’ is distinct from earth and nature. While the earth is our natural habitat, the world refers to the fabricated home that humanity has constructed for itself (HC: p. 52). It encompasses all kinds of human-made objects: institutions, art, infrastructure, and buildings. The world provides shelter from the forces of nature and is thus defined, in part, by its durability and relative permanence. The world is not something that we “consume” but can be passed on from one generation to the next. It is by virtue of their worldliness that human beings can transcend nature and withstand the transience of life itself. For Arendt, nature represents the inherent drive toward destruction that inheres in the biological life cycle. In human life, “nature manifests itself through the circular movement of our bodily functions” – our recurring need for sleep and rest, food, water, etcetera (p. 98). In the world, however, nature “makes her presence felt […] through the constant threat of overgrowing or decaying it” (ibid). Worldly objects like art and buildings possess a relative independence from their human makers. They can be used without being consumed, and they are made to “endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users” (p. 137).

The world plays an essential role in human existence, and a significant aspect of this role is its capacity to provide stability and resistance against the inherently destructive forces of nature. The world shields us from nature’s relentless cycle of production and consumption, and it thereby prevents us from being engulfed by a biological life process that can never lead anywhere but to death. Without the stability provided by a human-made world, we would
lose the points of reference that we rely on to orient ourselves. Our identities would be difficult to sustain, and our words and deeds would become meaningless and futile. In the absence of a common world, human beings would be reduced to mere biological creatures, “part of the endless cycles of nature, part of its endless flux” (d’Entrèves 1991: p. 81).

The world is constructed by human beings; it represents the achievement of humanity as *homo faber*, the working being. In *The Human Condition* (HC) from 1958, Arendt presents an account of the three central activities of *vita activa*, the active human life: labor, work, and action. These categories serve as the framework for her analysis of modernity. ‘Labor’, in Arendt’s terminology, refers to activities aimed at sustaining and reproducing life itself, whether at the individual, societal, or species level (ch. 3). Whether it corresponds with the biological needs of the body or the economic needs of society, labor is defined by its repetitive and necessary character. Human beings have a recurring need for food and rest, and in this regard, there is little room for individuality – we are all the same.

‘Work’, on the other hand, refers to activities with a defined beginning and end, culminating in the creation of enduring, tangible objects (ch. 4). The human worker, *homo faber*, channels her mastery and ingenuity into the fabrication process. Unlike labor, which corresponds with the necessities of life, work demonstrates the human capacity for control, creativity, and craftsmanship. The products of *homo faber* are made to withstand time and usage, and they thereby possess a relative durability and independence from their human makers and users. For instance, an architect constructs buildings that can be used and inhabited by human beings without being consumed by their need for shelter.

Lastly, ‘action’, as previously discussed, occurs directly between human beings. It is through action that human beings reveal their individuality, form relationships, and initiate new courses of events (ch. 5). Action is the fabric of history, and it is through acting that human beings can exert their freedom to begin anew.

On Arendt’s account, modernity has inverted the classical hierarchy of the three human activities. While the Greeks considered action the highest human faculty and labor the lowest, modernity has brought a revaluation of labor (*HC*: p. 306). What Arendt describes as the triumph of man as an *animal laborans* is not the same as the emancipation of the laboring classes. Rather, what she refers to is “the emancipation of the laboring activity itself (p. 126).

The most emblematic example of this shift in values is the rise of consumer society. In this society, organized around mass production and consumption, the values of *homo faber* – permanence and durability – have increasingly yielded to the values of labor: productivity, growth, wealth, comfort, and the overall sustenance of life itself. The modern triumph of the *animal laborans* and its detrimental impact on the common world is evident, Arendt contends, when one considers “the extent to which our whole economy has become a
waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the process itself is not to come to a catastrophic end” (HC: p. 134). Consumer society also infiltrates the mentality of its individual members, who are conditioned to think of all their activities either as means to “make a living” or as mere “hobbies” with which to fill their leisure time (pp. 126-128). Thus, the society of mass production and consumption is equally a society of consumers and laborers, “jobholders”, who have lost their ability to find meaning in activities that serve a purpose beyond that of reproducing life itself. In this society, Arendt remarks, even politicians “think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society”, and among intellectuals and artists, “only solitary individuals are left to consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living” (p. 5).

For Arendt, modern society is characterized by “the unnatural growth […] of the natural” (HC: p. 47). This may seem peculiar, given the tremendous influence of technology on modern life. However, as Canovan (1992) explains, it is crucial to observe that Arendt’s concept of the world is distinctive and influenced by the classicist notion of civilization as a human achievement. On this account, the artificial achievement of civilizations stands opposed to the barbarism that inheres in the natural order of things (pp. 105-108). Humanity, in Arendt’s view, has a meaning that extends beyond ‘human nature’: a truly human life is possible only in a world that allows us to rise above the life of mere “specimens of the species mankind” (HC: p. 118). Canovan therefore asserts that “Arendt’s view of nature owes nothing to Romanticism and a great deal to the Greeks, for whom nature was an endless cycle of birth and death, growth and decay” (1992: p. 107). Human beings, for the sake of their humanness, need a human-made world to protect them against the barbaric forces of nature, which would otherwise “compel them to swing relentlessly in the circle of their own biological movement” (HC: p. 137). In other words, technology and artificiality alone do not suffice to capture the meaning of ‘worldliness’, in Arendt’s sense of the term. The world is not defined only by its artificiality but also by its capacity to bestow stability on human existence.

Worldly stability does not come about automatically through technological progress. Modern automation, contrary to the Marxist anticipation, has not emancipated humanity from the chains of necessary labor. According to Arendt, Marx’s mistake was that he failed to comprehend that “the spare time of the animal laborans is never spent on anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites” (HC: p. 133). From Arendt’s point of view, it therefore makes little sense to hope that robots will eventually save us from the necessity of labor, and the hope that technology could solve all our problems is nothing but a dream. The only liberation that technology has to offer is the release from pain and effort, and such “progress” only makes us free to consume the world at an ever-greater speed (ibid).
The danger in modern automation, therefore, is not that it brings about an artificialization of natural life but rather that it reproduces and reinforces the logic of necessity that inheres also in the biological life cycle. The society of mass consumption could very well turn into a technological society. However, in this society, “[t]he rhythm of machines would magnify and intensify the natural rhythm of life enormously, but it would not change, only make more deadly, life’s chief character with respect to the world, which is to wear down durability” (p. 132).

In summary, Arendt’s concept of the world must be understood in contrast to her notion of nature as governed by the automatic, necessary drive toward destruction. It is by building a common world that human beings can create a shelter to protect themselves from the brutal forces of necessity, whether these are imposed on them by the biology of their own bodies or the algorithmic force of their machines. The loss of worldly stability is therefore one central aspect of the modern predicament, as Arendt understands it. The rise of consumer society and its elevation of the animal laborans alienates us from the common world by pulling us into our inner realm of needs and wants and their momentary satisfaction. A society that holds productivity and consumption power as its highest standard of success will condition its members into becoming self-absorbed. In a society like this, the common world – our “in-between” – loses its capacity to attract our care and concern. Unless we find a way to make a living on it (for example, by using it to make a “political career”), or relate to it as a product for consumption (for example, by consuming news and knowledge for the purpose of “entertainment”) – the world, and the time and attention it demands from its inhabitants, becomes a matter of secondary importance, a distraction or an encumbrance that takes valuable time and energy away from what is now perceived as the task of primary importance: sustaining life itself.

Critics have often lamented that Arendt’s political thought is charged with an elitist disdain for material welfare and social equality. “The rise of the social” has, in Arendt’s view, reduced the meaning of politics into a matter of economic housekeeping and bureaucratic administration. “The rise of the social” symbolizes the modern shift away from the values of the world to those of life, and the accompanying obfuscation of the distinction between public and private (HC: pp. 38-49). The modern preoccupation with social concerns, Arendt fears, is about to transform the public realm into a gigantic household, and it could eventually change the meaning of citizenship to become synonymous with nationality, to be a member of “one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest” (ibid: p. 39). In her view, the French Revolution ended in disaster precisely because of its emphasis on the social question: the goal of constituting a lasting space for freedom eventually got lost, as the French revolutionaries became caught up with their war on poverty (OR: p. 55).
Arendt’s disdain for ‘the social’ is often interpreted as an elitist invocation of ‘the virtues of a political ‘aristocracy’ of self-chosen citizens against the materialism of the vulgar masses, who pigishly prefer the material comforts of ‘private happiness’ to the more austere joys of ‘public freedom’” (Brunkhorst 2000: p. 191). For Arendt, political freedom is a “spatial construct” (PP: p. 119). There is no such thing as boundless freedom, and unlike our human needs and desires, freedom can therefore never become a “mass phenomenon”. The freedom to begin can only assert itself against the forces of necessity, but not eliminate them. Moreover, freedom is, on her account, only possible among equals, and equality cannot be realized as a “universally valid principle” but can only be achieved in limited realms. The realms of free speech and action therefore require insulation from the necessary forces of society, which would otherwise draw them into its endless cycle of needs, desires, and momentary satisfaction. An imperium of freedom would, for Arendt, be a contradiction in terms. Instead, the spaces of freedom must be thought of as “islands in the sea or oases in the desert” (OR: p. 279).

Arendt’s political thought does indeed contain elements of elitism\(^\text{14}\). She did overstate her distinction between public and private, and her worry that the modern public realm was being overtaken, and thereby disfigured, by social concerns blinded her to the emancipatory power of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s. At times, her annoyance with “the social” severely misled her judgment\(^\text{15}\). Nonetheless, I argue that there are crucial insights to gather

\(^{14}\) However, as Jeffrey Isaac (1994) argues, Arendt’s notion of the elite is not undemocratic: the type of insulation she advocates is neither exclusionary nor oligarchic but based on the principle of self-selection. In a sense, Arendt views the space of political freedom as the realm of an elite – but this elite is not (and ought to not be) the realm of a social class. For Arendt, the exemplary political elite was not the political leadership in the U.S. or in any other representative system of government, but the people who joined revolutionary groups such as Charter 77 in The Czech Republic or the Danish resistance movement against the German occupation. Her notion of the political elite is distinctly political, not social: this elite is an “aristocracy” of people who are willing to sacrifice personal comfort in pursuit of public happiness. According to Isaac, Arendt’s notion of the elite encompasses an ideal of grass root democracy. This notion of democracy as rooted in small-scale settings, “elementary republics”, is perfectly compatible with support of representative institutions such as general elections. However, by emphasizing the small-scale arenas of freedom, Arendt calls our attention to the sources on which the larger system of representative government depends for its nourishment. Parliaments and state bureaucracies remain indispensable; however, without meaningful spaces for grass root participation, these institutions are deprived of their basis of power. “For this reason, Arendt insists that while oases of civic initiative may engage and invigorate the larger system, they must always prize their own independency and insularity or else risk their own demise” (p. 165).

\(^{15}\) In a notorious essay, “Reflections on Little Rock” from 1959, Arendt criticizes the decision of the Supreme Court to enforce desegregation in public schools. In her view, school segregation was a social issue that went beyond the limits of what could legitimately be claimed in the name of equal political and legal rights. Arendt also voices concerns that the new school policy meant that children would now be sacrificed on the altar of integration: “[T]he most startling part of the whole business was the Federal decision to start integration in, of all places, the public schools. It certainly did not require too much imagination to see that this was to burden the children, black and white, with the working out of a problem which adults for generations
from her conception of modernity as characterized by an “unnatural growth of the natural”.

To begin with, Arendt is right, I suggest, in her critique of the Marxist dream that an abundance of material welfare would liberate humanity from the logic of necessity. Economic and social progress will not release us from the mentality that permeates capitalist consumer societies, and neither will scientific and technological progress alone suffice as a solution to the environmental crisis entailed by such consumerism. The imperial logic of capitalism – its “expansion for expansion’s sake” (OT: viii) – can only be overcome through a transformation of our political culture and our ways of relating to material objects and goods. Arendt’s warning that we should not project our hopes for political salvation onto economic growth or technological progress remains relevant for contemporary debates on issues such as climate change and AI.

The main point that I take from Arendt, however, is her observation about the modern reversal of the relationship between stability and freedom. The freedom to act, which is inherently volatile, must find accommodation within a stable, worldly home. This is one of the fundamental insights to be gathered from Arendt’s critique of modernity. Once again, her point becomes clearer if we recall that she articulated it as part of an attempt to understand totalitarianism. In The Origins of Totalitarianism (OT), Arendt notes that the totalitarian regimes never materialized into stable and predictable legal structures. The totalitarian parties retained their character as movements even after they had entered government. These regimes certainly defied all positive laws; however, Arendt maintains that totalitarianism, unlike tyranny, cannot be identified with lawlessness or the arbitrary rule of a single will (pp. 460-462). What defines totalitarianism is that “it claims to obey strictly and unequivocally those laws of Nature or of History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring” (p. 461). The totalitarian regime aspires to realize a rule in accordance with the laws of Nature or History, and what it promises is

have confessed themselves unable to solve. […] Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought ought in the school yards?” (RJ: pp. 203-204). Arendt’s essay was immediately met with sharp criticism. Years later, in a private letter to one of her critics, the Afro-American author Ralph Ellison, she admitted that she had not understood the complexity of the situation. In response to Arendt’s allegation that children were being asked to be heroes, Ellison had argued that such heroism was implied in the very experience of Black southerners, who were doomed to a life without recognition. “[T]he child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger precisely because he is a Negro American. Thus he’s required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation, and if he gets hurt – then his is one more sacrifice. It is a harsh requirement, but if he fails this basic test, his life will be even harsher” (Ellison 1965, as cited in Young-Bruehl 1982/2004: p. 316). In her reply, Arendt acknowledged that she had been mistaken: “It is precisely this ideal of sacrifice which I didn’t understand” (Arendt 1965, ibid). However, she never abandoned her view that education must not be used as an instrument for social or political change.

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not stability but the creation of a new, superhuman mankind. Thus, in totalitarianism, the very meaning of law has changed: “from expressing the framework of stability within which human actions and motions can take place, it became the expression of motion itself” (p. 464). This reversal of the relationship between stability and motion, law and action, is one of its key features. In the totalitarian state, men must be stabilized so that the law of motion can “race freely through mankind unhindered by any spontaneous human action” (p. 465).

The observation that totalitarianism involves a reversal of the political relationship between stability and movement undergirds Arendt’s critique of consumer society and the economization of modern politics. What capitalism shares with totalitarianism is that it organizes society according to a law of movement, thereby actualizing the need to “stabilize” human beings. In Arendt’s view, this reversal amounts to a distortion of the very concept of order. Whenever positive law gives way to a law of movement – be it Darwin’s law of natural selection, Marx’s law of class struggle, or the capitalist law of expansive accumulation – human freedom is at risk.

Arendt’s critique strongly resonates with Shoshana Zuboff’s (2019) more recent study of surveillance capitalism. According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism has introduced a new logic of accumulation. With this transformation, capitalists are no longer bound to a reciprocal relationship with a population of consumers because mass consumption is no longer the main factor. It has gradually been replaced with the information that the consumers – or rather, users – of market products and services are leaving behind. Surveillance capitalism does not exploit human labor but human experience as its source of raw material. This material is used in the manufacturing of “prediction products”, priced according to their capacity to predict the future. However, the same old capitalist law of expansive accumulation is still in operation. The surveillance economy is, therefore, an economic order inherently oriented toward totalizing predictability; and, as Shuboff remarks, “the surest way to predict behavior is to intervene at its source and shape it” (p. 17). The imperative of prediction is now incentivizing capitalists to make the future for the sake of being able to predict it. In this quest for total predictability, Zuboff contends, “[i]t is no longer enough to automate information flows about us; the goal is now to automate us” (p. 19, italics in original). The capitalist economy can remain stable only through growth, which means in turn that the surveillance economy can remain stable only if the population of users continues to conform to the predictions manufactured by capitalists. In other words, the liberation of the capitalist law of movement now demands the stabilization of human beings.
Loss of Belonging

Loss of belonging is the second dimension of world alienation. This loss manifests itself as atomization and social conformism at the societal level, and is experienced at the individual level as rootlessness, superfluity, and, at its most extreme, loneliness. Loneliness, Arendt writes, was once “a borderline experience usually suffered in certainly marginal social conditions like old age”; in the modern age, however, it “has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century” (OT: p. 478). The loneliness of the masses is on her account symptomatic of world alienation – it is a societal, not a psychological, phenomenon. In modernity, the common world “has lost its power to gather men together, to relate and separate them” (HC: p. 53). This implies that modern human beings have lost their “objective” relationships with one another, i.e., the relationship that comes from sharing a common object, a world of things. The masses are estranged from the common world, and therefore find themselves both isolated and pressed together into a mass (BPF: p. 90). Thus, the loss of the world not only weakens the connection between those who inhabit it but also eliminates the space in between them.

As we saw in the previous section, Arendt perceives the loss of worldly stability as a threat to human freedom. Without the stability of a worldly order – when the order itself is set in motion – the human faculty of action is paralyzed. The modern loss of belonging has similarly impacted on our political

16 The paradoxical relationship between modern individualism and conformism is also addressed by Zygmunt Bauman in his book Modernity and Ambivalence (1991). In modernity, he asserts, ambivalence has become “a personal affair” (p. 197). This means that “[t]he attainment of clarity of purpose and meaning is an individual task and a personal responsibility” (ibid). The burden of uncertainty is privatized. This situation not only creates a pressure on human beings to define their own identities – it also creates an enormous demand for “artificial supports”, e.g., for technologies that can help us in our efforts to attain uniqueness. Curiously, Bauman describes this quest for identity and recognition – for belonging, or even “love” – as the “existential foundations of expertise” (p. 200). Echoing Arendt’s notion of modernity as a condition of world alienation, Bauman characterizes contemporary society as a state of permanent displacement. “All individuals are displaced, and displaced permanently, existentially – wherever they find themselves at the moment and whatever they may happen to do. They are strangers everywhere and, their efforts to the contrary notwithstanding, at all places. There is no single place in society in which they are truly at home and which can bestow upon them a natural identity” (p. 201). In modern culture, individuality is imperative; yet, individual identity is requires social affirmation. We can only receive and sustain our personal identities through social recognition. But social bonds and stable relationships are exactly what have become a scarcity in the modern world. The failure of modern human beings to sustain their identities through actual relationships creates an enormous demand for substitutes that can perform the function of a human relationship, but without requiring reciprocity (p. 205). According to Bauman, it is this craving for substitutes that drives the expertization of contemporary societies: expertise, he argues, offers us “a love without love (love without the risks of reciprocity; love without the worrisome dependency on passion)” (p. 208). For example, if we fail in our attempts to establish lasting friendships or romantic relationships, we can opt for a risk-free substitute by buying ourselves some therapy. In the therapy room, “[o]ne can be concerned with oneself, and have the concerns shared, without giving another thought to the person who has taken upon oneself the obligation of sharing merely as a part of a business transaction. In a straightforward monetary transaction, the patient purchases an illusion of being loved” (p. 205, italics added).
capacity: it destroys our appetite for politics, our inclination to care for the common world, and it eventually undermines even our ability to experience it as real. Without a sense of belonging to the world, of having a place in it, we lose our ability to find meaning in political activities. In fact, without a sense of belonging, the world itself soon begins to appear less real to us. Arendt’s critique of modern mass society, I argue, is not that the masses are too ignorant or incompetent and therefore unfit for political participation (cf. Lippmann 1922). Instead, her argument suggests that it is the alienation and loneliness of the masses that make them vulnerable to political manipulation.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt observes that a life in ‘private’ originally meant a life of deprivation (*HC*: p. 38). For the Greeks, the private life within the household was unfree, governed by needs and necessities. Those who lived their life entirely within the private realm – i.e., slaves, women, and children – were per definition deprived of the things that defined human life at its highest: the freedom to move among one’s peers, to speak and act politically. This freedom was inherently linked with the possibility of achieving greatness – the possibility to leave something behind, something greater and more permanent than life itself (p. 58). However, although private life was deprived of public happiness, it was not miserable. Those who were relegated to live their lives entirely within the private realm could still “find a substitute in the warmth of the hearth and the limited reality of family life” (p. 59). They were deprived of their place in the world, but not of their private home in it.

The loss of belonging in modern mass society entails a deprivation of a different kind. Mass society, Arendt asserts, not only erodes the public realm but also the private. Therefore, it “deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home” (*HC*: p. 59). A ‘mass’ is not the same as a group of people. The mass is composed of atomized individuals who are “privatized” in the sense that they have no worldly connections in between themselves, which means, in turn, that they “cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest” (*OT*: p. 311). Arendt characterizes the mass as apolitical per definition, as it is made up of “those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls” (ibid). However, the mass is not only a (non-)group of unorganized, scattered, isolated individuals. Mass society also presses these individuals together, and thereby destroys their space for individuality. By pressing human beings together, mass society creates conformity. In other words, the constituency of a mass society is both politically indifferent, atomized, and conformist: the mass is a body of people who have all been “equalized” by their society, deprived of their distinctiveness, and subjected to the rule of a collective oneness. A society of this kind, Arendt asserts, “always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest” (*HC*: p. 39).

At the societal level, thus, the modern loss of belonging manifests itself as the emergence of masses – politically indifferent and socially conformist non-
groups of anonymous people who think and behave as if they all belonged to the same family. Without a common world to share, human beings lose both their interconnections and their individuality. The gist of Arendt’s critique is that mass society is based on ‘social’ rather than ‘political’ principles of organization. In this society, equality is substituted with sameness; action with behavior; individuality with isolation. The masses are unworldly in the sense that they have lost their inclination to care for the common world, and their capability of forming relationships with one another based on worldly concerns. Instead, they become inclined to search for identity by joining social tribes, i.e., semi-private groups that resemble families in that they are held together by the similarities of their members rather than a common interest, cause, or object of concern.

At the individual level, the modern loss of belonging reveals itself as the experience of loneliness. Loneliness, Arendt insists, is not the same as isolation:

I can be isolated – that is in a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me – without being lonely; and I can be lonely – that is in a situation in which I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship – without being isolated (OT: p. 474).

Isolation is always disempowering because power, according to Arendt, “springs up in between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (HC: p. 200). Individual initiatives can materialize into events only if others respond to them. Other human activities, however, can be pursued in isolation. For instance, thinking necessitates withdrawal from the company of others. Solitude is essential for thought; however, thinking is not a lonely business (LMT: p. 185). Arendt characterizes thinking as a dialogue with oneself. Human beings can think only by engaging in an internal dialogue, splitting into a “two-in-one” (pp. 179-193). Although thinking is undertaken in solitude, Arendt emphasizes that our thinking faculty can function only if it remains in touch with the common world. All thoughts originate from experience, but experiences can acquire meaning only through the operations of thought and imagination (p. 87). The connection between mind and world enables us to mentally bring forth – to re-present through imagination – things that are absent; and it is by engaging in silent discussions with our imagined interlocutors that we can get these things into proper perspective.

The thinking operation is disrupted by loneliness, which Arendt describes as “the experience of not belonging to the world at all” (OT: p. 475). In a state of loneliness, we are unable to split up and engage in an inner dialogue. Without this internal dialogue, we lose our capacity to imagine how the world appears to others and to entertain their views in a silent conversation. While solitude allows us to remain in touch with the world and the people in it, even
though they are removed from our presence, loneliness is a state of complete estrangement, a state where one feels “abandoned by everything and everybody” (p. 476). This experience, Arendt asserts, is “among the most radical and desperate experiences of man” (p. 475). Its desperation lies in its paralyzing effect on almost all human faculties: not only does it destroy our capacity to act, but also to think, reflect, even to experience.

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time (OT: p. 477).

Plurality – the fundamental fact “that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (HC: p. 7) – is crucial for understanding Arendt’s concept of worldliness and its opposite, world alienation. Our elementary trust in our own sense organs, and thus our very ability to perceive the world and have experiences, ultimately depends on this condition. The world can appear real to us only when “things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity” (HC: p. 57). Therefore, when we lose our ability to entertain various perspectives on the world, we inevitably lose our sense of reality. According to Arendt, reality is not guaranteed simply by our biological senses – our ability to see, hear, and smell it – but “by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object” (pp. 57-58). Loneliness deprives us of the trusting and trustworthy companionship that we need to validate the reality of the impressions received by our senses: it deprives us of the conditions under which we can feel assured that the events unfolding before our eyes are real and not mere illusions. Loneliness, therefore, is not just an extreme and desperate condition. It is also, quite literally, a maddening experience. By fostering distrust in our own senses, it eventually undermines our very sense of reality. In a state of complete estrangement, the boundary between reality and fantasy no longer exists.

Loss of Common Sense

The modern estrangement from the world not only breeds indifference and instability. According to Arendt, it also numbs our very sense of reality. At its most extreme, alienation from the world is experienced as loneliness. In that desperate state, reality itself is endangered. Without a world to share with other people, we lose our capacity to tell fact from fiction. For Arendt, thus, loneliness is the breeding ground for political insanity. This brings us to the
third dimension of Arendt’s concept of world alienation: the loss of common sense.

As we have already seen, plurality is key to understanding Arendt’s notion of worldliness. The fact that the world is shared by a plurality of human beings is not only the condition sine qua non for action. According to Arendt, this basic condition also grounds our mental faculties: our capacity to think, judge, and to even have experiences. This insight, which she credits to Kant, demonstrates the depth of human sociability: “that men are dependent on their fellow men not only because of their having a body and physical needs but precisely for their mental faculties” (LKPP: p. 14). Human beings are political animals to their core. Even the functioning of our minds depends on our coexistence with others, which suggests that the notion of autonomy is misguided and illusory. The emphasis on human plurality and co-dependence also undergirds Arendt’s assertion that “[a] noticeable decrease in common sense in any given community and a noticeable increase in superstition and gullibility are […] almost infallible signs of alienation from the world” (HC: p. 209). When the common world is lost, idiotism is inevitable.

With her concept of common sense – which she also refers to as our “community sense” or our sensus communis – Arendt develops her theoretical understanding of the relationship between our worldly existence and inner life. Drawing on Kant’s work on judgment17, Arendt defines common sense as the

17 In the secondary literature on Arendt’s concept of common sense, it has often been argued that Arendt misinterprets Kant by “empiricalizing” his notion of the sensus communis, and that her own theory thereby becomes ambiguous or even inconsistent, as she oscillates between two different conceptions of common sense (see e.g., Beiner 1992; Norris 1996; Peeters 2009a; 2009b). According to the common reading of the Third Critique, Kant defines the sensus communis in terms of the free play of our imagination and our understanding. On this account, common sense is a kind of “sixth sense” that brings together our five private senses. Thus, it is the sense that enables us to know that the person we see standing before us is the same one we can hear and touch. For Arendt, however, our common sense is not just grounded in the interplay between our individual senses but a kind of “extra sense” that is grounded in our plural coexistence with other people in the world. Thus, “[w]hile both Kant and Arendt contend that the sensus communis makes experiences possible, the relation involved in Kant is one between the faculties, and not, as in Arendt, one that transpires in the plurality of the polis” (Norris 1996: pp. 186-187). However, as Annelies Degryse (2011) suggests, Arendt’s treatment of Kant is not a misinterpretation but a creative re-appropriation of his work. Taking Kant’s insight about human sociability as her point of departure (“that men are dependent on their fellow men not only because of their having a body and physical needs but precisely for their mental faculties” (LKPP: p. 14, emphasis added)), Arendt moves beyond him and develops an original account of the relationship between our human existence in the world and our mental life. Arendt’s creative appropriation of Kant can indeed be read as an “empiricalization”. For her, common sense is not a transcendental sixth sense but a sense that is grounded in our interactions with other human beings in the world. Common sense enables us to make sense in our communications with other people. If we withdraw ourselves too far from the common world, this sense can be lost. For example, Arendt often remarked that a certain loss of common sense is the déformation professionelle of philosophers. Philosophers need solitude to think; however, if they withdraw themselves too far from the affairs and events of the world, they risk losing their common sense. According to Arendt, this was the mistake of both Plato and Heidegger:
“sense which fits us into, and thereby makes possible, a common world” (PP: p. 36). Like our five private senses, common sense is a “sense” in that it grounds our ability to experience. Just as vision makes possible the world of appearances, so does common sense make possible the common world.

Common sense corresponds with our sense of reality: it grounds the sensation of “sheer thereness” (LMT: p. 51) that accompanies our experiences in the world, but not our daydreams. It is our common sense which enables us to sense that other people can see and hear the same thing as we do; that we are not just hallucinating but are dealing with something real. However, common sense not only grounds our ability to experience the world but also our ability to “make sense” when we speak and interact with our fellow human beings. It is this sense that enables us to sense how our own perspectives on the world – e.g., our opinions about it – will appear to others, before we open our mouths and share them.

Following Kant, Arendt asserts that common sense resembles taste in that it is also a discriminatory, choosing sense – a sense that discriminates between what pleases and displeases. However, while taste is immediate, subjective, and private, common sense operates at a distance from the immediate sensation of pleasure and displeasure (LKPP: p. 69). Common sense thereby enables us to distance ourselves from our own idiosyncratic position and distinguish that which is merely private and subjective in our viewpoints from that which is more general, a view that others could understand and agree with. Thus, common sense, in cooperation with imagination, supports communicability: it helps us sort out the distinction between what is private and subjective, and that which could be understood and win the approval of others.

The significance of common sense is demonstrated by the ability of human beings to communicate through speech (LKPP: p. 70). Speech, Arendt asserts, is not about self-expression. If the whole point was to express ourselves, our inner sentiments, sounds and physical gestures would be sufficient. Animals cannot speak, but they can express fear, joy, anger, and shame well enough. Communication through speech, in contrast, requires a shared language, and the point of using it is to convey a meaning that makes sense to others.

According to Arendt, the human capacity to communicate through language demonstrates that we do have an intuitive sense for the common world. This sense enables us to do more than merely express the feelings and impressions that we bear inside ourselves – it enables us to use language as a medium for their desire for solitude made them detached and hostile to the political exchange of opinions in the public realm. As Degryse explains, Arendt’s empiricalization of Kant does not mean that she confuses actual with potential communication. “Her reading of Kant is much more subtle than this. Arendt claims that without testing our judgments against the judgments of others, we might lose our community sense and, as such, our capacity to judge. She makes the mental process of judging dependent on actual speech and communication” (p. 356). Our estrangement from the world does not deprive us of the capacity to speak, i.e., to utter sentences. However, it may eventually erode our ability to engage in meaningful communication, our ability to make sense.
for appealing to the common sense in others, to their ability to see the world from our point of view. Quoting Kant, Arendt remarks that “[t]he only general symptom of insanity is the loss of the sensus communis and the logical stubbornness in insisting on one’s own sense (sensus privatus), which [in an insane person] is substituted for it” (LKPP: p. 70). The insane person has not lost the capacity to express themselves through words. What is lost in insanity is the ability to sense how one’s ideas and feelings might appear to others, and hence, the ability to judge their communicability – that is, whether they make any sense.

Arendt’s conception of common sense elucidates the link between our inner life of the mind and our life in the common world. Common sense is a “sense” in that it grounds our human capacity to experience. However, it is not a physical sense organ but a peculiar “extra sense” (LKPP: p. 70). It is not given to us by God or nature but is grounded exactly in our worldliness, and it is practiced and cultivated through our practices of sharing the world with others. The modern estrangement from the common world is therefore inevitably accompanied by a loss of common sense. Put bluntly, when human beings fall out of touch with the world, they become senseless. According to Arendt, what they lose is not their intelligence or capacity for rational problem-solving but the intuitive reality check that comes from comparing one’s own views and experiences to the anticipated views and experiences of others.

Interestingly, Arendt draws a connection between the modern decline of common sense and the evolution of modern science. At first sight, this may seem puzzling, not least since Arendt herself describes science as “an enormously refined prolongation of common-sense reasoning” (LMT: 54). However, her argument is not that science as such is at odds with common sense but that, in modernity, science and common sense have gradually begun to drift apart.

The widening gap between science and common sense, Arendt argues, is demonstrated by the growing inability to translate scientific propositions into common language (HC: p. 3). By adopting mathematics as their medium of communication, scientists have been able to transcend the limits of ordinary speech. Modern scientists can reckon with entities that are unimaginable to the human mind, and they can demonstrate the validity of claims that would never make any sense in an everyday conversation. This triumph of modern science has further enabled us to produce technological devices that can do things that are beyond the grasp of human comprehension (BPF: pp. 263-4). The mathematical language of science can be used to prove that a hypothesis is correct, but we cannot use it to talk about scientific theories and results. According to Arendt, this shows that knowledge and meaning are not the same, and that “whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about” (HC: p. 4). She further contends that the modern disconnect between science and common sense carries dangerous implications: it threatens our ability to “think what we are doing” (p. 5). While
modern science has greatly improved our “know-how”, i.e., our capacity to control our environment and act on the basis of evidence, this type of knowledge is by no means the same as understanding:

If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we could indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is (HC: p. 3).

On Arendt’s account, the “scientific idiotism” that arises from the failure to reflect on the meaning of what we do, and hence to understand what one is doing, is symptomatic of modern world alienation. And the story she presents regarding its origins is a story about the loss of certainty of appearances, and the corresponding loss of faith in our human senses.

The event that Arendt characterizes as the pivotal moment in the history of science is Galileo Galilei’s invention of the telescope. The telescope not only enabled Galileo to confirm Copernicus’s heliocentric theory; unknowingly, he had also initiated the beginning “of a new science that considers the nature of earth from the viewpoint of the universe” (HC: p. 248). The political significance of this event, Arendt argues, consists in its promise of a new kind of objectivity: an objectivity released from the old constraints that always apply to all human, earth-bound perspectives. The telescope made it possible for human beings to distance themselves from the world and the earth, and to study their surroundings from a more universal, detached, and objective point of view. Thus, Galileo’s introduction of the telescope symbolizes what Arendt understands as the evolution of a “universal science” – a science defined by its ambition to liberate itself from the limits and biases that inevitably accompany all human perspectives on the world18.

The desire for universal knowledge is age-old. The objective of the universal science is essentially to fulfill Archimedes’s ancient dream of obtaining an extra-perspectival viewpoint – a kind of God’s eye-view – from which to study the earth and the world in their totality (HC: pp. 257-262). However, it is only in modernity that human beings have truly endeavored to realize the Archimedean dream, with the help of technology.

The evolution of a new, more universal science has evolved in tandem with the invention of new scientific tools and methods. Modern science and technology have significantly enhanced our capacity to observe and measure, a capability which “can function only if man disentangles himself from all involvement in and concern with the close at hand and withdraws himself to a distance from everything near to him” (HC: p. 251). However, this detachment

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18 It is worth noting that Arendt’s notion of modern science is idiosyncratic and informed by her perspectivism: in her view, the hallmark of modern science is its aspiration to observe and study from the perspective of the universe.
has not only improved our ability to mitigate human biases. According to Ar-  
endt, it has also sparked a wave of doubt about the reliability of our human  
senses. Essentially, what the telescope proved was not only that the earth re-  
volves around the sun; it also demonstrated the fundamental uncertainty of  
appearances and the inherently unreliable nature of our human senses (pp.  
260-262). The disturbing conclusion – which has been reiterated and con- 

firmed many times throughout modern techno-scientific history – is that our  
human sense organs are profoundly deceptive, and that we are always at risk  
of being fooled by them. In other words, the very development that gave us  
the gift of objective knowledge also appears to deprive us of our unques- 

ioning faith in the reality of experience:

"It is as if Galileo’s discovery proved in demonstrable fact that both the  
worst fear and the most presumptuous hope of human speculation, the  
ancient fear that our senses, our very organs for the reception of reality,  
might betray us, and the Archimedean wish for a point outside the earth  
from which to unhinge the world, could only come true together, as  
though the wish would be granted only provided that we lost the reality  
and the fear was to be consummated only if compensated by the acqui-

sition of supramundane powers (HC: p. 262)."

If modern science is defined by its attempt to escape from the earth into the  
universe, modern philosophy is characterized by a corresponding flight from  
the world into the self. According to Arendt, the philosophy of René Descartes  
is the epitome of this modern philosophical endeavor to evade the uncertainty  
of the human condition by retreating into the inner realm of human conscious-  

ness. The problem Descartes grappled with was the loss of certainty – that

19 What Arendt suggests is not that Descartes caused the modern loss of the  
world. Rather, her point is that his philosophy is the example that best illus- 
trates the intellectual turn to introspec-

tion in modernity (HC: pp. 272-273). It should be noted that Arendt’s understanding of history  
is neither materialistic nor idealistic. Against all kinds of historical determinism, she insists that  
history is governed by events, not by material forces or intellectual ideas. Arendt’s aversion  
against all kinds of determinism also informs her skepticism about the idea of causality in the  
social sciences. In a commentary on The Origins of Totalitarianism, 7 years after the publica-

tion of the original edition, Arendt laments her choice of title. “What bothers me is that the title  
suggests, however faintly, a belief in historical causality which I did not hold when I wrote the  
book and in which I believe in less today” (TWB: p. 157). She explains that the book should  
not be read as a work of history and that its true topic is not the causes of totalitarianism, as the  
title misleadingly suggests, but its elements. The origins that she writes about in the first and  
second part of the book were not only “seen from the vantage point of the present, but would  
not have been visible at all without the light which the event, the emergence of totalitarianism,  
shed on it. In other words, the ‘origins’ of the first and second part of the book are not causes  
that inevitably led to certain effects; rather, they became origins only after the event had taken  
place” (ibid). Similarly, Galileo’s invention of the telescope and Descartes’s introspective phi-

losophy should not be understood as the “causes” of modern world alienation. Rather, they are  
“origins” in the sense they have the power to elucidate the nature of the modern development,  
a power that they only came to possess after this development had already run its course.
is, the loss that Arendt describes as the unintended consequence of Galileo’s
telescope.

The modern loss of certainty extends far beyond the recognition of human
fallibility, which is much older. What modernity entailed was a disillusion-
ment with the self-evident: the erosion of the elementary belief that truth man-
ifests itself readily, through appearances, and that our senses are equipped to
perceive it (HC: p. 276). This implies “that neither truth nor reality is given,
that neither of them appear as it is, and that only interference with appearance,
doing away with appearances, can hold out a hope for true knowledge” (p.
274).

Descartes formulated his theory in response to this profound loss of cer-
tainty, and according to Arendt, Cartesian doubt differs from doubt in the or-
dinary sense. In Cartesian philosophy, doubt serves not merely as a necessary
safeguard against illusions, nor does it equate to the healthy skepticism that
protects us from prejudices (HC: p. 273). What sets Cartesian doubt apart is
its universality: “that nothing, no thought and no experience, can escape it”
(p. 275). For all we know, reality might be nothing but a dream, a mere de-
ception to our senses, and it is therefore conceivable that the universe is gov-
erned not by God, but by an evil spirit whose “consummate devilry […] would
consist in having created a creature which harbors a notion of truth only to
bestow on it such other faculties that it will never be able to reach any truth,
ever be able to be certain of anything” (p. 277). Thus, Descartes took uni-
versal doubt as his point of departure, and his solution was to search for certainty
within the human self:

If there was salvation, it had to lie in man himself, and if there was a
solution to the questions raised by doubting, it had to come from doub-
ting. If everything has become doubtful, then doubting at least is certain
and real (HC: p. 279).

This philosophical response to the loss of certainty is in part an admittance of
defeat. It conceded that the certainty of reality and the reliability of experience
had been lost for good. Rather than attempting to reclaim it, philosophy re-
sponded to the loss of certainty by shifting its focus away from worldly expe-
riences, venturing instead into the depths of the human self.

Descartes’s most renowned contribution lies in the famous axiom, cogito,
ergo sum – “I think, therefore I am”. However, what he found within the hu-
man self, Arendt asserts was not “thought”, because thinking is an activity that
deals with experience. Instead, he encountered a process more akin to the bi-
ological workings of the human body: a relentlessly flowing stream of con-
sciousness. This stream of consciousness cannot attain understanding or make
sense of anything that happens in the world. Without a connection to the ex-
ternal world, it cannot “experience” or make sense of experiences. It is con-
fined to “the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself”
This detached “experience” exists independent of the world of appearances, and hence it is preoccupied solely with its internal processes. The only “reality” it can confirm lies in the consistency of its own reasoning: for instance, the certainty that two and two are four; or that Socrates is mortal by necessity, if we assume he is a man and that all men are mortal. The reckoning of the mind can prove, with necessity, the validity of its own conclusions. Thus, when the certainty of experience was lost, modern philosophy turned away from reality and meaning, and seized the necessary force of logic.

The modern quest for certainty, Arendt argues, has generated two basic ideas. The first is the ontological notion that the reality of appearances is guaranteed only as subjective states-of-mind. When I see a tree before me, the tree is real in the sense that it exists as an image in my mind – that is, it is real in the sense that it is now integrated into my subjective stream of consciousness (HC: p. 282). I cannot be certain that the tree exists “for real” in the external world, but at least I can be certain that the image exists in my own consciousness, and that it will continue to exist for as long as I can keep the image in my mind (p. 281).

The second idea, and the more important one for Arendt, is the epistemic notion that “though one cannot know truth as something given and disclosed, man can at least know what he makes himself” (HC: p. 282). We cannot be certain that the world is real and more than just a dream; and neither can we be certain that the world is ruled by God and not an evil spirit. However, the truth that remains within the realm of the certain is that “neither God nor an evil spirit can change the fact that two and two are four” (p. 284). The conclusion, therefore, was that we could no longer rely on reality as it is given to our senses. Instead, we must put our faith in human ingenuity, in the productivity of our own minds.

For Arendt, these two ideas illustrate the modern divorce between our life in the world and the inner life of our minds, and how it leads to the erosion of common sense. This modern philosophical outlook replaces the notion of reality based on appearance with one grounded in subjective states-of-mind, and its method of asserting certainty does not rely on human senses but on the rational force of calculation. With this shift, the concept of knowledge transforms into “know-how,” and common sense gives way to instrumental rationality. “What men now have in common”, Arendt writes, “is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking; their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody” (HC: p. 283). She further remarks, in a tone of irony, that the new philosophy has only served to render itself obsolete in a world where the calculating capacity of machines surpasses even the strongest instances of human intelligence. Under such circumstances, scientists no longer find much need for philosophy as their “handmaiden”, as they have now discovered that it is perfectly possible to produce both facts and technologies that “work”, even when they are quite impossible to understand (p. 294).
Arendt’s critique of modern science and philosophy further highlights the oppression involved in world alienation. The divorce between world and thought destroys our ability to “think what we are doing” (HC: p. 5). What is lost is not our capacity to calculate the risks of scientific and technological ventures but our capacity to reflect on their meaning. Without this capacity for reflection, Arendt argues, humans “are indeed no more than animals who are able to reason, ‘to reckon with consequences’” (p. 284). Such creatures may still be able to act – that is, to initiate new and fundamentally unpredictable processes. However, they would indeed be deprived of their freedom, condemned to helplessness, and enslaved by their own know-how (p. 3). This assertion demonstrates that Arendtian freedom cannot be understood in terms of action alone. Although Arendt is usually interpreted as primarily a theorist of action (see e.g., Kateb 1977), her notion of freedom as the human capacity to begin anew can only properly be understood in conjunction with another faculty, which will be explored in the next chapter: the faculty of judgment.

For Arendt, the divorce between mind and world is a threat to human freedom, and her word for this threat is “thoughtlessness”. Without the capacity to reflect on experience and make sense of it through imagined and actual conversations with other people, we risk becoming like Eichmann – the SS officer who played a key role in organizing the Holocaust. Arendt’s report on the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem (EJ) sparked intense discussion and harsh critique at the time of its publication. In following the trial, Arendt had found Eichmann to be neither mentally deranged nor monstrous in any psychopathological sense, but surprisingly mundane, bland, and “banal”. There was no question that he was guilty of monstrous crimes. However, his actions did not appear to her to be driven by sadistic motives or a passionate hatred of Jews. In Arendt’s view, Eichmann was not a monster but a clown. He was no great villain but a pathetic, petty man, whose most striking features were his lack of imagination and his tendency to speak in clichés. Eichmann’s deficiency, Arendt posits, lay not in perversion, lack of intelligence, or heartlessness, but in his thoughtlessness – his apparent incapacity to reflect, actively and imaginatively, on the meaning of his actions. Eichmann knew that he was sending people to a slaughterhouse, still, Arendt insists that he “never realized what he was doing” (EJ: p. 287, italics in original). Eichmann’s thoughtlessness – his outrageous banality – numbed him to the reality of his actions and made him prepared to act as if he were not a human agent but a mere cog in a machine.

Arendt’s characterization of Eichmann has been strongly criticized, and sometimes on good grounds. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that Arendt

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20 In a critical re-assessment of Eichmann, Bettina Stangneth (2014) challenges Arendt’s account and argues that Eichmann was much more of a fanatic than she presented him to be. By attending to historical material that was publicly unavailable at the time of the trial, Stangneth convincingly argues that Eichmann was not just a thoughtless bureaucrat who longed to impress
in no way tried to excuse Eichmann. Her intent was not to trivialize his crimes or absolve him of personal responsibility. She fiercely rejected the hypothesis that anyone would have acted the same if they had been in his shoes (TWB: p. 448). Her argument, rather, was that Eichmann exemplified a type of evil that defied our standard conceptions of it: an evil that was extreme but not radical, that was entirely superficial and thought-defying in its shallowness, and without connection to any comprehensible human motive. In Arendt’s view, the man on trial was not a demon. However, her point was not to excuse his crimes but to alert us to the possibility that “evil can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface” (Arendt 1963-4, as cited in Young-Bruehl 1982/2004: p. 369).

World Alienation and the Crisis of Expertise
So far in this chapter, I have unpacked Arendt’s notion of world alienation by exploring three of its dimensions: loss of stability, loss of belonging, and loss of common sense. Through this examination, I have aimed to clarify what Arendt means by her assertion that modernity has entailed a loss of the common world, and how this poses a threat to human freedom. In this section, I will return to our contemporary predicament to see how Arendt’s critique can elucidate the democratic problem reflected in the present crisis of expertise. Arendt’s critique, I suggest, offers an interpretative framework that enables us to see the crisis in a new light: as illustrating a failure to uphold our connection to the common world. Thus, from an Arendtian viewpoint, the crisis does not reflect a failure of public reason. Rather, it now appears to reflect a widespread sense of resignation – an unwillingness or inability to shoulder the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

The promise of expertise in the public realm is to alleviate uncertainty and assist public judgment. The modern transformation has complicated this task. Scientific agreement does not automatically translate into political consensus; nor does more and better knowledge automatically lead to greater certainty. In fact, “[e]fforts to reduce uncertainty through scientific research often have the exact opposite effect of increasing uncertainty” (Pielke 2007: p. 54); and the surge of new uncertainties is better understood as the result of the successes of modern science than of its failures (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons 2001: pp. 60-61; see also Latour 1998). The contemporary crisis of expertise can
therefore be interpreted as illustrating the human struggle to cope with uncertainty in times when traditional structures have waned. The heightened uncertainty in modern knowledge society demands a response. However, as Arendt warns, the human quest for certainty can also become destructive, leading us to turn even further away from the common world.

As we have seen, Arendt argues that the modern concept of order involves a reversal of the relationship between stability and movement. The classic notion of law as a stabilizing element – the “fences” defining the space for free human interaction – now competes with the modern notion of law as a “law of movement”. This law orders society by pushing the masses to go along with it. It can achieve stability only when allowed to operate freely, unhindered by spontaneous human action. Arendt’s critical observation highlights how scientific knowledge can become complicit in fostering an order that undermines human freedom. For instance, in surveillance capitalism, knowledge derived from behavioral science is not only used to predict social behavior but also to condition individuals to conform to those predictions. This economic order thus creates a conflict between stability and freedom: capitalist societies can remain stable only through continuous growth, and the growth of the economy relies on human conformity to its predictions. In essence, this order appropriates scientific knowledge in its attempt to stabilize human beings.

The contemporary crisis of expertise illustrates the human struggle to cope with the uncertainties of modern knowledge society. With the modern transformation, citizens have been assigned the burdensome role as “experts on experts”. In this context, it may be tempting to mitigate uncertainty and foster stability by circumventing public judgment altogether. Let me elaborate.

If the contemporary crisis manifests the failure of democratic publics to cope constructively with the burden of judgment, then one possible approach could be to relieve citizens from the responsibility of having to judge for themselves. Instead of burdening them with the responsibility that comes with their new role as experts on experts, they could simply be given a script to follow – a method that enables them to choose correctly, without having to give the matter much thought. This approach encapsulates the logic of “nudging”, i.e., the type of social engineering that uses knowledge from behavioral and cognitive science to softly push people in the direction of a desirable outcome.

The concept of nudging has been theoretically elaborated by the behavioral economist Richard Thaler and the legal scholar Cass Sunstein (see Thaler & Sunstein 2008), and includes a range of techniques in public policy that are designed to be “liberty-preserving” in the sense that they “steer people in particular directions, but […] also allow them to go their own way” (Sunstein 2014: p. 583). Nudges involve no coercion and no prohibitions. Instead, they create compliance by gently pushing – “nudging” – people to make the right choice or behave in a certain manner. Nudging is not the same as information, because these techniques are designed to steer, not to inform or enlighten. Rather, it is a technology that uses knowledge from behavioral science to design
choice situations in ways that condition the choosing subject to behave in a certain way.

Sunstein gives several examples of nudges that people use in their everyday lives: a GPS that instructs you on how to drive, an app that measures your intake of calories, an automatic text message that informs customers that their bills are due, and so on. One of the earliest and most well-known examples of nudging comes from the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, where the cleaning manager managed to considerably reduce the costs of cleaning the toilets by etching stickers with flies onto the urinals. Another example of nudging from a more political context is the warning labels that exist on social media posts about certain topics, i.e., nudges that have been designed to prevent people from believing and sharing fake or dubious content and to steer them to look for information on official websites.

Contemporary society is full of nudges, most of which are perfectly harmless and politically inconsequential. However, the Arendtian framework alerts us to the problem of this approach. Nudging alleviates uncertainty by using scientific knowledge to create intelligent technologies that solve our problems for us. In this approach, the role of scientists is no longer to assist public judgment or even to assume a role as policy advisors. Instead, their role is to remain behind the scenes, influencing decisions and behavior by design. What they contribute to public life is not their judgment but technology and automation.

While technology itself is not a political problem, it can become problematic if it conditions human beings to resign from the task of making up their own minds about common issues. Automation can effectively mitigate risks and uncertainties, but it does not support the ability of citizens to cope constructively with the burden of judgment. It does not stir us to think what we are doing. Instead, technologies like nudges creates stability and order by circumventing the whole judging operation. Nudges do not assist our judgment; rather, they are most effective when people do not think at all but thoughtlessly conform to the predictions of mass psychology. Thus, in response to the loss of worldly stability, the technological approach creates order by exploiting the forces of impulse, routine, and group behavior, conditioning people to conform to general laws of movement. From an Arendtian perspective, this approach is anti-political: it creates order by stifling spontaneous action, and rather than stirring citizens to use their own understanding, it renders judgment superfluous.

Another possible approach is to mitigate uncertainty through exclusion. If modern knowledge society requires citizens to become experts on experts, then perhaps it is necessary to make sure that this role falls only on those who are competent enough to perform it. This approach is advocated by epistocrats like Jason Brennan (2016), who argue that the epistemic quality of political decision-making can be improved by importing elements of epistocracy (“rule by knowers”) into our existing democratic systems of government.
Brennan’s proposal and the objections it has provoked from democratic theorists are reminiscent of the classic debate between Walter Lippmann (1922; 1925) and John Dewey (1927) in the early days of modern democracy. Lippmann argued that ordinary citizens have neither the time nor the cognitive capacity to inform themselves about political affairs. The masses are vulnerable to manipulation and propaganda, and hence unfit to participate directly in politics. According to Lippmann, there is no such thing as “public opinion” – because “the public” is just a phantom, and the opinions formed in democratic mass societies are not informed by facts and critical thinking. Instead, public opinion is better understood as reflecting the simplistic and prejudiced images conveyed by mass media. Lippmann therefore concluded that political decision-makers should pay minimal attention to popular opinions. To protect the quality of government decisions and shield the political process from propaganda and prejudice, he suggested that democratic governments should instead take their advice from an independent expert agency, an “intelligence bureau”, which must be insulated from the influences of mass society (1922/2007: ch. XXVI).

In response to Lippmann’s elitist proposal, Dewey emphasized the epistemic value of communication and the cooperative nature of public knowledge. An intelligence bureau, no matter how intelligent it would be, could never replace the role of the public, because “in the absence of an articulate voice on the part of the masses, the best do not and cannot remain the best, the wise ceases to be wise” (1927/2016: p. 223). Dewey was in no way hostile to science or scientific expertise, but he insisted that specialized knowledge can serve the purposes of the public only if it remains in close communication with the views of ordinary people. “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (ibid). His point was not merely that there must be institutional mechanisms for holding experts accountable to public interests but that experts can only remain truly expert by paying close attention to the views of the public. Public knowledge – that is, the type of knowledge that is needed to regulate common affairs – cannot be monopolized. “In the degree to which they [the experts] become a specialized class, they are shut off from knowledge of the needs which they are supposed to serve” (ibid). According to Dewey, exclusion would only further erode the competence of the political system, because public knowledge is not the product of individual intelligence. Only communication can allow us to bridge the gap between the limited capacity of human cognition and the virtually boundless complexity of modern society.

Lippmann and Dewey advocated two opposing approaches in response to the crisis of their time. However, they were essentially in agreement as to the nature of the problem. The issue, as they understood it, is how to bridge the divide between the complexity of modern society and the limited capacity of the human mind. Arendt’s diagnosis of the modern predicament is a different
one. The problem she addresses is not the gap between the complexity of modern society and the simpleness of human cognition, but the modern disconnection between the individual mind and the common world.

Like Lippmann, Arendt is critical of modern mass society, and less hopeful than Dewey about the democratic prospects of modern science and technology. However, her critique is not premised on the idea that the masses are too incompetent to participate in a meaningful sense in democratic politics. The problem with mass society, in her view, is not the lack of intelligence but the lack of meaningful contexts. “The chief characteristic of mass man,” she writes, “is not brutality and backwardness but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships” (OT: p. 317). Mass society isolates individuals while pressing them together into a mass. It is this aspect of modern society – that it alienates us from the common world and erases the space in between us – that makes its members receptive to manipulation and propaganda. The worldlessness of the masses renders them “idiotic”\(^{21}\). However, this idiotism does not reflect popular irrationality or ignorance, but the widespread inability or unwillingness to search for meaning through imaginative thought.

The problem Arendt addresses is existential, not epistemic. The issue, in her view, is not that the modern public realm has failed to properly support public knowledge. Rather, the problem is that it has failed to support our ability to remain in touch with our common world. By eroding the worldly contexts that human beings need to endure uncertainty, modern society conditions its members to turn away from their common world – by escaping into the universal, or by withdrawing into the self. This flight from the world is spurred by the wish to escape its burdens and boundaries. The effect, however, is a further erosion of the conditions under which human beings can bear the burden of their freedom.

When we apply the Arendtian framework to the contemporary crisis of expertise, the apparent failures of public judgment no longer look like symptoms of ignorance or irrationality, but of alienation and loneliness. What is lost in modern mass society is not rationality but worldliness. Alienated individuals feel estranged from the world, unable to find their own place in it. They cannot sustain their identity through sharing the world with others but are conditioned to search for a sense of belonging by joining groups that are defined by the sameness of their members – for example, groups that unite on the basis of a common nationality, ethnicity, worldview, lifestyle, or experience. Instead of directing their attention toward the facts and events of the world, alienated individuals become absorbed by their private lives and their subjective state-of-mind. What feels most real to them is no longer the world, but their own reactions to it. When human beings fall out of touch with their common world, they lose not only their ability to identify with common issues but also their

\(^{21}\) Originally, an “idiot” – \textit{idiotēs} in classic Greek – was a private individual, as opposed to a “common man”, which was someone who held a political office.
ability to distinguish fact from fantasy. Hence, without a meaningful relationship to the world, we lose our very sense of reality.

The contemporary crisis of expertise highlights the vulnerability of the democratic public realm. According to the Arendtian interpretation, the issue is not that citizens could go wrong in their judgments; rather, the fundamental issue is that they could resign from actively judging at all. Instead of assuming the burden that comes with their new role as experts on experts, citizens could end up forsaking this role completely. Arendt’s name for this problem is thoughtlessness. The inability to think is not an inability to rationally deduce conclusions from premises. Thoughtlessness, in Arendt’s sense, is a failure of imagination: an inability or unwillingness to imagine what the world looks and feels like from various points of view. It is not the same as irrationality, ignorance, or lack of intelligence, but is better understood as a form of numbness – a zombie-like state of being less alive. Thoughtless individuals are not unintelligent, they are asleep. Consequently, thoughtlessness is a threat to human freedom in the sense that it destroys our capacity to withstand the forces of necessity – our capacity to assert our freedom to act against such forces, or resist being swept away by them.

The inability to assert one’s freedom against the forces of necessity can manifest itself in various ways. Sometimes, it reveals itself as passivity and apathy: as when people stick to the old routine even when they know for a fact that it will lead them to ruin. At other times, thoughtlessness can reveal itself as hyper-reactiveness: as when people react on their first impulse or are set into blind motion by external stimuli. Thus, thoughtlessness is not necessarily a state of passivity but can also manifest itself as hyper-reactiveness. However, either way, the inability or unwillingness to think always involves resignation to necessary forces. Such resignation poses a threat to democracy because democratic institutions and practices are not “natural” – they are achievements that can prevail only if they are affirmed continuously by citizens. Essentially, democracy can prevail only if citizens remain willing and able to assume the burden of having to make up their own minds about common issues. The alienation from the common world therefore threatens to undermine the existential conditions for democracy.

The oscillation between political apathy and frenzy in the contemporary political culture is well-captured by Anton Jäger’s (2022) notion of ‘hyperpolitics’. Hyperpolitics is Jäger’s name for the dynamic of politicization that operates in tandem with the depoliticization of contemporary culture. “Today, everything is politics. And yet, despite people being intensely politicized in all these dimensions, very few are involved in the kind of organized conflict of interests that we might once have described as politics in the classical, twentieth-century sense” (p. 412, italics in original). According to Jäger, hyperpolitics is a reaction to the depoliticized neoliberalism of the “End of History”-era. However, rather than counteracting the anti-political effects of neoliber-
alism, hyperpolitics further assists in deepening the disconnect between politics and policy, delegating the former “to a mediasphere addicted to novelty”, while leaving the latter to be controlled by unelected power (ibid). What the Arendtian framework could add to this characterization of the contemporary political culture is that it is no coincidence that we use expressions like “Twitterstorms” to describe the overheated debates on social media. When people become absorbed by such agitated debates – where provocations and reactions appear to follow each other automatically, as in a chain of cause-and-effect – what we have is no longer a real conversation, a meaningful exchange, but something more akin to a natural phenomenon, a “storm”. According to the Arendtian interpretation, hyperpolitics is not only a reaction to neoliberal depoliticization but also symptomatic of a more longstanding process of estrangement from the common world.

Summary

In this chapter, I have examined Arendt’s critique of modernity and argued that her notion of world alienation offers a new perspective on the contemporary crisis of expertise. The instrumental and the procedural approach both interpret the crisis as illustrating the problem of rational adjudication. In response to this problem, they offer two different approaches for how to contain disagreement within the limits of reason. The Arendtian diagnosis elucidates a different aspect of our contemporary predicament: the problem of affirmation. In this perspective, the question that prompts reflection is how to affirm freedom, despite its great costs. Thus, whereas the two currently predominant approaches both address the question of how to rationalize democratic opinion-formation under modern conditions, Arendt’s political thought revolves around the more existential problem of how to cope with the added burden of judgment in modernity.

Arendt’s notion of world alienation, I have suggested, can be analyzed in terms of a threefold loss: loss of stability, loss of belonging, and loss of common sense. In Arendt’s view, the estrangement from the world does indeed pose a threat to public judgment, it makes us “idiotic”. However, this idiotism is not a symptom of ignorance, irrationality, or a lack of intelligence, but reflects the failure to maintain a meaningful relationship to the common world. According to Arendt, the human intellect can only properly function if it stays in touch with the world and the people in it. Thus, the loss of the world stifles our imagination and numbs our very sense of reality. In a state of worldlessness, the distinction between fact and fiction becomes blurred – not because the masses are incompetent or uninformed, but because mass society conditions us into becoming self-absorbed, and hence unable to distance ourselves from our own feelings and experiences.
The loss of the world does not deprive human beings of their capacity to reason in a logical fashion, i.e., to rationally deduce conclusions from premises. However, it does impair our ability to make sense of what we know and experience, and ultimately, it impairs our sense of reality. In principle, worldless individuals could still be reasonable in the sense of adhering to the rules and norms of public reason. For instance, they could learn to distinguish scientific matters from matters of personal opinion, or to behave like respectful participants in a seminar, listening to the arguments of others and giving reasons in return to support their own views. However, unless the participants of the public conversation experience themselves as connected to their common world, they will nevertheless remain somewhat numb to the reality under discussion.

The thoughtlessness that accompanies the modern disconnection between world and mind poses a problem for democracy. What is threatened is not primarily the ability to form opinions based on reason, but the ability to find meaning in the task itself. In other words, the issue is not so much how citizens could learn to master their new role as experts on experts, but how they could endure it. This Arendtian interpretation of the crisis points to the need to develop a new constructive approach to expertise in democracy. What is needed is an approach that articulates a role for experts beyond the framework of public reason – one that considers how expertise contributes to the conditions under which human beings can stand to keep in touch with their common world, and affirm their freedom to begin it anew. In the next chapter, I will construct the conceptual foundation for this approach by exploring three Arendtian concepts: authority, the public, and judgment.
Chapter 4
Confronting the Predicament – Three Central Concepts

Arendt is well known for her critique of modern society. As we have seen, Arendt understood modernity as entailing a loss of the common world – a process of alienation that destabilizes politics, uproots identities, and erodes our sense of meaning, even our very sense of reality. However, the nature of her constructive political outlook is far more ambiguous. Arendt was neither a liberal nor a conservative. She disliked the concept of ‘progress’ and dismissed all attempts to bring the old traditional world back to life as futile nostalgia. Her political thought contains several seeming contradictions. One of them is the apparent tension between the elitist and egalitarian elements of her thought, a tension that has received much attention in the secondary literature (see e.g., Canovan 1978; Brunkhorst 2000; Isaac 1994).

The difficulties in categorizing Arendt’s political outlook are perhaps connected to the non-ideal character of her theory. Arendt never specified the nature of her ideal political system because she was not the type of thinker who constructed blueprints for an ideal society. She was a realist in the sense that she was convinced that all thinking must proceed from experience and remain bound to it as its only guidepost (BPF: p. 14). When the connection between thought and experience is broken, we get lost in the mazes of abstractions we have built for ourselves (p. 136). Arendt used the allegory of Penelope’s web to describe the thinking activity: “it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before” (LMT: p. 88). This emphasis on the relentless, self-destructive character of thinking suggests that she saw the whole idea of grounding politics on a philosophical system as essentially misguided. On Arendt’s account, the role of philosophy in politics is much more limited than philosophers throughout history have liked to think (see Canovan 1983b; Disch 1994).

Arendt never wrote about expertise, nor did she articulate an explicit account of democracy. It remains debated whether it is even possible to extract a coherent work theory from her work, or if we should simply accept that her thought is packed with inconsistencies and tensions that cannot be resolved. The many conflicting interpretations of Arendt’s work are at least partly due to her lack of systematics, as well as her fondness for storytelling. Arendt did
not construct any philosophical systems, and she did not systematically present her arguments but developed her ideas by exploring various “thought-trains”. Her work is motivated by her own wish to understand, not a wish to convince, as she explained in her interview with Günter Gaus (EU: p. 3). Her writing has a literary style that invites ambiguity: she was fond of irony, aphorisms, and of putting together interesting stories, which she told “with a charming disregard for facts” (Young-Bruehl 1977: p. 183). Indeed, Arendt sometimes described her style of theorizing as her “old fashioned story-telling”, which she contrasted with the more systematic style of analytical philosophy, “the acceptable method of insulating, distilling, and hence alienating interpretation” (TWB: p. 210). As a theorist, Arendt left much – sometimes too much – to be interpreted by the reader. Yet, as an intellectual storyteller, she was also “able to leave her hearers and readers magically convinced that everyday speech is latently philosophic” (Young-Bruehl 1977: p. 189).

Given the ambiguous and contested character of Arendt’s political thought, it might be justified to question her relevance for this part of the thesis. If there is no coherent democratic theory to extract from her work – let alone one that applies smoothly to the role of experts – would it not make more sense to turn to other sources of intellectual inspiration in search of a new constructive approach? In response to this question, I suggest that Arendt’s lack of systematics can also be regarded a strength, in the sense that she left her political thought open for creative appropriations that can lead us to new intellectual pathways extending well beyond the scope of her original work. Indeed, there is no democratic theory of expertise in Arendt’s oeuvre that can be extracted if we only read her work between the lines. Nonetheless, in this chapter, I will show that her political theory contains important building blocks that can be used to develop a new democratic theory of expertise. The new approach to expertise that I will begin to develop in this chapter (and further develop in Chapter 5) is democratic in the sense that it responds to the problem identified in Chapter 3. The problem that Arendt identifies with her critique of modernity, I argue, is one that democratic theory needs to address. This problem – how to resist thoughtlessness and affirm our freedom to begin the world anew, despite its tremendous burden – corresponds with the existential conditions for democratic politics. The central assumption here is that democracy can survive over time only if citizens remain willing and able to affirm freedom: to assume the burden of judgment rather than trying to escape from it, by withdrawing into the private or by taking refuge in the anonymous laws of the universe.

The problem of how to affirm freedom is a specifically modern predicament. It was in modernity – after the breakdown of traditional structures and hierarchies – that freedom emerged as a problem: an “abyss”. The modern attempt to escape the abyss of freedom manifests itself as an inability or unwillingness to judge. This problem is now actualized in the contemporary crisis of expertise, where citizens struggle to cope with their new role as experts.
on experts. Arendt’s political thought can therefore offer us a new perspective on the crisis. According to the Arendtian interpretation that I advance in this thesis, the fundamental issue confronting us in the present crisis is not that citizens could fail in their new role, but rather that they might resign from it. As I interpret Arendt’s notion of thoughtlessness, this resignation occurs when we fail to actively make up our own minds, and thoughtlessly succumb to the forces of necessity. On this account, the democratic problem that we now confront in the contemporary crisis of expertise is the risk that citizens might surrender their judgment to the forces of necessity, relinquishing their freedom in exchange for the comfort of being released from its burdens.

In this chapter, I will take the first step toward developing a new normative approach to expertise in democracy, one that is ‘existential’ in that it articulates a role for experts that corresponds with the existential conditions for democracy. By examining three of Arendt’s central concepts – authority, the public, and judgment – I will develop the conceptual foundation for such a constructive approach. In the final chapter, I will discuss the implications of this approach in more normative terms and put in perspective by comparing it with the two approaches examined in Chapter 2.

The analysis of this chapter pivots on three of Arendt’s central concepts: authority, the public, and judgment. Through an examination of these three concepts, I aim to develop a notion of what it means to recover the common world from the losses described in Chapter 3. Each of these concepts corresponds to one of the losses that constitute Arendt’s notion of world alienation as described earlier. By applying them to the role of experts, we can begin to grasp what it means to view expertise as a world-building enterprise.

First, by examining Arendt’s concept of authority, I aim to develop a notion of expertise as a stabilizing element in the common world. According to Arendt, ‘authority’ serves as the foundation of the world, providing permanence and durability to the political realm of human affairs (BPF: p. 95). In Arendt’s view, authority is distinct from both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. It is a position that cannot be conquered or claimed but given voluntarily, akin to a gift bestowed by those who adhere to it. To be in authority is to be in an elevated position. I argue that Arendt’s notion of authority, which differs from conventional conceptions in political science (see e.g., Weber 1919/2009; Raz 1990), is particularly relevant for understanding the role of experts in the modern public realm. By drawing on Arendt’s notion of authority, we can develop a new conception of ‘expert authority’ and acquire a sense of how expertise can contribute an element of “constitutional” stability to political affairs.

Secondly, by examining Arendt’s concept of the public, I will develop a new notion of expertise as a public vocation – a vocation that supports our sense of belonging to a common world. In Chapter 1, I conceptualized expertise as public knowledge. According to this conceptualization, scholars and scientists do not act as experts when they engage in research or teach at their
universities. They assume the expert role only when they enter the discussions and decision-making processes that take place in the public realm. By examining Arendt’s concept of the public, I will elaborate on the significance of the context of expertise: public discourse. On Arendt’s account, the power of the public lies in its character as an “in-between”. Like a table brings together those who sit around it, so does the public realm relate and separate citizens at the same time (see HC: p. 52). The public realm grounds our political sense of belonging by relating us to the things we have in common: institutions, infrastructure, and issues of common concern. By gathering us around common issues, public discourse enables us to identify them as our concerns, as issues deserving our care and attention. By enabling us to relate to other people through a shared concern for common issues, the public realm also preserves a political space of plurality. Moreover, the public realm not only grounds our sense of belonging to a political collective – according to Arendt, it also grounds our sense of belonging to a common reality. On her account, our very sense of reality is a political achievement. Because it is by sharing the world with other people, by engaging with multiple perspectives on it in the public realm, that we become able to experience it as “objective”, that is, as having a reality beyond that of our private, subjective ideas and sensations.

According to the Arendtian perspective, public discourse serves a twofold function in democratic politics: first, it grounds our sense of political identity by relating us and separating us through our shared concern for public issues; and second, it grounds our sense of reality by enabling us to see the world from a plurality of perspectives. In this view, democratic opinion-formation is not a procedure of reasoning, and the point is not to eventually arrive at universally acceptable conclusions. The point, rather, is to keep gathering around the issues that lie between us, and which therefore also separate us. By examining Arendt’s notion of the public, we will thus be able to attain a new sense of expertise as a public vocation. In this view, the ‘public’ vocation of experts does not lie in supporting a universally valid procedure of reasoning, but in supporting the ability of citizens to keep gathering around the issues they have in common.

Thirdly, by examining Arendt’s concept of judgment, I will develop a notion of what it means to affirm freedom: what it means to resist thoughtlessness and assume the burden of having to make up one’s own mind. Arendt describes the faculty of judgment as “the most political of man’s mental abilities” (RJ: p. 188). What she means is that judgment is our faculty for bridging the divide between thought and action, i.e., the faculty that enables us to “think what we are doing”. Judgment, like action, encapsulates our human capacity to bring novelty into the world. As we have seen, Arendt sees action as representing our human capacity to introduce new events, and thereby initiating new beginnings. The faculty of judgment represents a corresponding mental capacity: it is this faculty that enables us to originate new understanding from
experience alone, without taking recourse to any predetermined rules or concepts. This freedom in judging sets it apart from other mental abilities such as rational deduction and cognition, but also from the Kantian notion of ‘free will’ as the ability to follow the commands of one’s own reason.

Judging, in Arendt’s view, is not a matter of expressing one’s subjective preferences, but neither can it be construed as a rule-bound procedure. Drawing on Kant’s aesthetic theory, she describes judging as a two-step operation by which we must first visit the viewpoints of other people before eventually arriving at a decision, and “choose our company”. It is through this operation that human beings affirm their freedom and accept to bear the load of uncertainty and responsibility that inevitably attaches to it. By examining Arendt’s concept of judgment, we will therefore be able to get a sense of what it could mean for experts to support the ability of citizens to resist thoughtlessness and affirm their freedom to begin anew.

Authority

In her essay *What is Authority?* from 1954, Arendt opens with a bold statement. She there asserts that it would have been more fitting to ask in the title what authority was, rather than asking what it is, because in her opinion, “authority has vanished from the modern world” (*BPF*: p. 91). But Arendt was wrong to draw this bold conclusion. Authority, in Arendt’s specific sense of the term, did not disappear with the decline of the traditional world. It merely shifted and assumed a different, modern-day form. Thus, although I will assume that Arendt is correct in her observation that traditional authority has lost its standing in modern society, I will also contest her notion that authority has ceased to be relevant for our time. Modern societies still rely on authority: the authority of experts. While Arendt herself never applied her concept of authority to scientific experts, I will show that her idea of authority is particularly relevant for understanding the position of experts in the modern public realm: how it is sustained and how it serves as a stabilizing element in political life. In fact, Arendt’s concept of authority is more relevant for understanding the position of experts than it is for understanding that of our political leaders.

*Authority in the Roman Context*

In the political science literature, the concept of authority is typically understood as closely related to rule. According to a common definition, authority is “a right to rule” (Christiano 2012; Peter 2017). This conception builds on Max Weber’s classic definition of the state as a “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (1919/2009: p. 78). However, according to Arendt, the modern notion of authority as a right to rule radically deviates from the original concept. On her account, authority must be defined in contradistinction to both
coercion and persuasion through arguments – it is “an obedience in which men retain their freedom” (BPF: p. 105).

To restore the original meaning of the concept, Arendt returns to the historical context where authority relations first appeared: the Roman Republic (BPF: p. 104). The Roman institution that best illustrates the notion of authority is the Senate – the assembly of elders (patres) who “obtained [their authority] through descent and by transmission (tradition) from those who had laid the foundations for all things to come, the ancestors” (pp. 121-122). The senators were tied to the past – to the founders of the city – and this connection enabled them to serve as guideposts for the future. The Roman senators were no rulers: they did not command, and they had no means to enforce their judgments on the public.

As Arendt observes, the word ‘authority’ derives from the verb augere, “to augment” (BPF: p. 121). Hence, what the senators did was not to rule but to augment – to affirm and condemn, i.e., to pass judgments from an elevated position. Such augmentation should not be mistaken for rule or coercion. Arendt insists that the authority of the Senate was contingent on its incapacity to enforce its decisions: “(t)he authoritative character of the ‘augmentation’ of the elders lies in its being a mere advice, needing neither the form of command nor external coercion to make itself heard” (p. 123). The power of those who have authority is strictly limited. What they can do is merely affirm and condemn the actions of others, and give advice for the future. They cannot issue commands or coerce people into compliance. Authority is not a force. On the contrary, the use of force is the manifestation of its absence – it is what people resort to when augmentation fails (p. 92). Authority is also distinct from power. What authorities can provide is “mere advice”, but they cannot move their subjects into action. Authorities, according to Arendt, are essentially powerless. They are not in control of their own position but receive it as a gift from below: it is a position that can only be given and sustained by the voluntary deference of those who adhere to it.

In Rome, the authority of the elders was transmitted by tradition, and its source of legitimacy was the act of foundation. The foundation had a crucial significance in Roman politics. As Arendt remarks, this meant that Roman politics became an inherently conservative enterprise. Roman politics had nothing to do with change or progress. Rather, to be involved in politics was essentially to be involved in the preservation of the city (BPF: p. 120). This conservatism of Roman politics, Arendt suggests, came from the belief that was at the core of all Roman culture, namely the conviction “that once something has been founded it remains binding for all futures” (ibid). The act of foundation was a sacrosanct event, the source of a religious commitment. Arendt therefore contends that authority-relations depend on support from other cultural elements. Authority cannot stand on its own but requires support from the two other pillars of the “Roman trinity”: tradition and religion (p. 124). So long as all three elements remained in place, this trinity could serve as the
solid groundwork for Western civilization. However, with the Reformation, and later, with the Enlightenment spirit of the 17th and 18th centuries, this foundation began to crumble:

[W]herever one of the elements of the Roman trinity, religion or authority or tradition, was doubted or eliminated, the remaining two were no longer secure. Thus, it was Luther’s error to think that his challenge of the temporal authority of the Church and his appeal to unguided individual judgment would leave tradition and religion intact. So it was the error of Hobbes and the political theorists of the seventeenth century to hope that authority and religion could be saved without tradition. So, too, was it finally the error of the humanists to think it would be possible to remain within an unbroken tradition of Western civilization without religion and authority (BPF: p. 128).

What authority brought to the world was stability, “the permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are mortals – the most unstable and futile beings we know of” (BPF: p. 95). As we have already seen, Arendt identifies modernity with a process of destabilization. Without religion and tradition to support it, authority – the foundation – is no longer secure. With the fall of the Roman trinity, the modern world has lost its permanent character and has now “begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever-increasing rapidity from one shape into another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else” (ibid). Without the stability of a worldly foundation, human beings become more susceptible to the totalitarian promise of total control and more tempted to create order by aligning with the laws of movement.

Experts as Modern-Day Authorities

Arendt asserts that traditional authority has waned in the modern world. In contemporary times, faith in the sanctity of the past has dwindled, and tradition no longer serves as a reliable guide for the future. Traditional authorities are no longer recognized, and any attempt to revive them, Arendt insists, is doomed to fail (BPF: p. 141). I do not dispute Arendt’s assertion that traditional authority has become irrelevant in the modern era. However, what she fails to acknowledge is that the decline of traditional society has not spelled the end of all authority-relations. One such hierarchical but voluntary relationship persists: the relationship between experts and citizens.

In many respects, the role of experts in contemporary society mirrors that of the Roman patres. Similar to their Roman counterparts, the power of scientific experts is limited. They are no rulers: what they can do is merely give advice, but they cannot coerce their audiences to comply with their recommendations. Scientific experts can share their opinions, but they do not make
the rules. They have platforms and credentials, but they have no means to enforce their views on the public. Thus, experts have authority in a specifically Arendtian sense: they speak from an elevated position in the public realm. The experts are not like any citizen – they have the public’s ear. This position, however, does not grant them the right to “rule” and it makes no sense for them to issue “commands”. Nevertheless, the experts do occupy a privileged position in the public realm, a position from which to affirm and advise – and, as Arendt notes, in a reference to Theodor Mommsen, authoritative advice is such that it cannot safely be ignored (p. 122).

Nevertheless, expert authority also differs from traditional authority in terms of its cultural underpinnings. Expert authority is not tied to a sacrosanct event in the past; instead, it is forward-looking. It is based on the secular faith in progress, broadly speaking, as well as the faith in science and academic knowledge as important means to build a better world. The notion of progress, often associated with the Enlightenment and with thinkers like Francis Bacon (1561-1626), accords science a special status in the public realm due to its progressive nature. Unlike other realms such as art, religion, and politics, advancements in science can, at least in principle, be identified by clearly defined standards (see Niiniluoto 2019). The scientific method enables the advancement of our knowledge of the world, and as Bacon famously stated, knowledge is empowering. Thus, while traditional authority was rooted in the faith in a sacred past, expert authority is grounded in the idea of scientific progress and its promise to contribute to a better future.

Expert authority also differs from traditional authority in its mode of acquisition. While Roman senators obtained their positions through descent, experts acquire their authority through credentials based on their academic achievements, such as a PhD or a professorship. The accreditation of experts is administered by universities, which serve as public guarantors of the academic mode of knowledge production. Although science and academic research are conducted also by private institutions and outside academia, universities remain the sole institutions authorized to grant academic degrees. In this sense, universities have the institutional authority to delineate science from non-science, determining who qualifies as a genuine ‘expert’ (Biesta 2007). Hence, expert authority does not rely on tradition and religion but is upheld by elements of the modern world: the faith in the progressive promise of science, and public recognition of university credentials as the reliable method for identifying authentic representatives of science and academic knowledge.

*Truth and Politics: The Constitutional Element of Expertise*

I will now turn to another renowned essay by Arendt – *Truth and Politics* from 1967 – to illustrate how expertise can bring an element of “constitutional” stability to modern politics. In this essay, Arendt examines the conflict-ridden relationship between truth and politics, and discusses the modern phenomenon of mass manipulation. According to Arendt, the relationship between truth and
politics has never been smooth. From a political standpoint, she asserts, “truth has a despotic character” (*BPF*: p. 236). By this, she means that truth has always been a source of frustration and irritation in politics. “Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies” (ibid).

The antagonism between truth and politics is not itself new. Plain lies have always been used in politics to suppress inconvenient truths. Arendt’s concern, however, lies in the exacerbation of the political vulnerability of factual truths in modernity. Unlike rational truths, which are axiomatic and self-evident, factual truths have a public character. Arendt observes that facts and opinions share a fundamental contingency. Facts are never necessarily true, and they are therefore inherently dependent on human testimony for their validation. This implies that facts, like opinions, rely on the public realm for their survival. While rational truths can be rediscovered if they are lost or forgotten, factual truths are infinitely more fragile: they can survive only in the light of the public, and “[o]nce they are lost, no rational effort will bring them back” (*BPF*: p. 227). Facts are not self-evident or logical – in fact, they often defy our expectations. Therefore, while Arendt maintains that all truths are opposed to opinion in their mode of asserting validity – what all truths have in common, she contends, is “that they are beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent” (p. 235) – factual truths resemble opinions in that they owe their existence to the public realm.

Lying has been a persistent aspect of politics throughout history. However, Arendt argues that mass manipulation is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Manipulation does not merely involve lying. What defines it is its totalizing aspirations and consequences. To better understand Arendt’s distinction between ordinary lying and modern manipulation, we can analyze it across three dimensions.

First, plain lies usually revolve around genuine secrets or motives that remain hidden from the public eye. In contrast, a defining feature of modern manipulation is that it deals “efficiently with things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody” (*BPF*: p. 247). For instance, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the event itself was not concealed. But instead of acknowledging it as an ‘invasion’ or ‘war’, Kreml refrained from all such terms. While the event itself was not denied, its significance was obscured by the official propaganda, which portrayed the Russian activity in Ukraine as a “special military operation”.

Secondly, while traditional lies typically revolve around specific events or circumstances, Arendt contends that modern manipulation is less concerned with individual facts and more focused on “the making of an alternative reality” (*BPF*: p. 249). In essence, mass manipulation does not merely substitute truths with falsehoods but aims to craft propagandistic narratives. For instance, when Russia stages military parades to commemorate Victory Day,
marking the Soviet victory over Nazi German in 1945, or when Russian mothers appear on national television on Mother’s Day to honor their deceased soldier sons, the issue is not that true statements are being denied or replaced with falsehoods. Rather, the essence of such propaganda lies in its reconfiguration of the meaning of the reality it portrays. While it is true that Soviet defeated Nazi Germany in 1945 and that the women appearing on television are indeed mothers of fallen soldiers, these events are woven into a narrative meticulously orchestrated by the Russian regime to control the public perception of the war. Hence, what defines modern mass manipulation is not lying as such, but rather that it mobilizes both truths and falsehoods to construct an ideological narrative of reality.

Thirdly, Arendt posits that while traditional lies are primarily aimed at deceiving enemies, modern manipulation has grander aspirations – it seeks to deceive everyone, including the manipulators themselves (BPF: pp. 249-250). A self-deceived liar is likely to be more successful than a conscious deceiver, because “[o]nly self-deception is likely to create a semblance of truthfulness, and in a debate about facts the only persuasive factor that sometimes has a chance to prevail against pleasure, fear, and profit is personal appearance” (p. 250). Self-deceived liars will appear more convincing, as their belief in their own falsehoods creates an air of credibility. When falsehood saturates the public realm, self-deception can masquerade as authenticity. Thus, from an Arendtian perspective, Russian propaganda is not merely a tool wielded against dissidents and foreigners – it targets everyone, including state-controlled journalists, loyal experts, and government officials, all of whom are integral parts of the propaganda machinery. To effectively “sell” their narratives, the manipulators must try to convince themselves of their validity. Modern manipulation is therefore distinct from ordinary lying in that it not only involves deception but also self-deception. Whereas the lie preserves the truth within consciousness of the liar, modern mass manipulation shatters the very distinction between truth and falsehood, fact and fiction.

Arendt has often been criticized for her rigid distinctions – between public and private, between the social and the political, and between truth and opinion (see e.g., Habermas 1977). Indeed, Arendt’s notion of factual truth may seem more limited than what we commonly understand as ‘facts’ in everyday language. A factual truth, according to Arendt, is a claim that is beyond agreement and dispute – it is beyond debate, and thus delineates the boundaries of political discourse. The facts she refers to are simple and straightforward; for example: “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914”. However, many facts, including scientific ones, are far more complex and uncertain. For instance, while it may be a fact that women are paid less than men for the same work, this fact is not indisputable. While the income gap is statistically confirmed, there remains considerable room for debate over the nuances of this claim – such as how to interpret the meaning of “same work”.

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Today, Arendt’s narrow view of factual truth may strike us as naïve. Most facts are not, as she puts it, “beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent” (BPF: p. 235). Facts do not carry their meaning within themselves, and they are typically sustained not only by human testimony but also by the technologies (e.g., microscopes, software) and research methods (e.g., experiments, quantitative analysis) by which they have been attained. However, the gist of her argument becomes clearer if we view it as part of her effort to identify the novelty in mass manipulation.

Arendt’s argument essentially revolves around the idea that the loss of the common world endangers both opinion and factual truth. Without a common world to ground their existence, even the most elementary facts can be called into doubt (“Is it really a war going on, or merely a ‘special military operation’?”). When everything is up for grabs, and when even the most basic facts can be rendered doubtful and disputed as if they were opinions, the freedom of opinion – the freedom to judge for oneself – is turned into a farce (BPF: p. 234). Our freedom to use our own judgment can be meaningful only within the boundaries of factual truth – on this point, Arendt largely concurs with the instrumental approach. Factual truths, of the kind she describes, must be recognized as beyond agreement and dispute. Such truths can be likened to a constitutional framework, establishing a bounded space within which we may move freely. In Arendt’s view, freedom is the lifeblood of politics. However, our freedom to initiate new beginnings can only exist as a bounded phenomenon. Without such boundaries – the fences that separate fact from opinion, the closed past from the open future – politics loses not just its stabilizing foundation but also its starting point, the position from which we can assert our freedom to begin anew (p. 254). As Arendt concludes at the end of her essay:

[Politics] is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises. Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us (BPF: p. 259).

The freedom to judge for oneself can be meaningful only by respecting its own limitations. The freedom to agree and disagree on matters of opinion can make sense only if it proceeds from an unquestioning acceptance of basic facts, such as “Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914,” or “Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.” At first glance, this perspective on the boundary between fact and opinion may appear reminiscent of the instrumental approach. Both perspectives stress the need for constitutional stability in the relationship between politics and knowledge. What we may now describe as “post-truth politics” was a concern also to Arendt and her contemporaries.
Without a constitutional framework based on factual truth, the political freedom of opinion becomes hollow and devoid of substance.

However, the Arendtian perspective on the relationship between politics and knowledge also differs significantly from that which governs the instrumental approach. According to Arendt, facts, like constitutions, can only be upheld through continuous affirmation. Such affirmation cannot be coerced or guaranteed from above. Lying, Arendt writes, “belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom” (*BPF*: p. 246). What facts share with opinions is their contingency – they are never true by necessity; it could be otherwise – and this contingency grants us the freedom to lie about them. The vulnerability of factual truths testifies to our freedom to affirm or deny. The authority of all constitutions, including the factual boundaries of free opinion-formation, is ultimately sustained by voluntary affirmation. Thus, public recognition of basic facts cannot be imposed from above, by expert gatekeepers. In the final analysis, the factual boundaries of public discourse depend on public judgment for their preservation.

*Expert Authority in the Democratic Public Realm*

Let me summarize the discussion so far. Authority, for Arendt, represents the stabilizing element in the realm of human affairs. Authority provides the stability that human beings need to exert their freedom to act and form their own opinions. Factual truths contribute an element of constitutional stability to public discourse, by constituting the bounded space within which we are free to agree and disagree. According to Arendt, an unlimited freedom of opinion would be meaningless: when everything is up for grabs, our opinions will mean anything and nothing at the same time. This perspective may initially appear identical to the instrumental view on the relationship between politics and knowledge. However, in Arendt’s view, all constitutional boundaries, even factual ones, ultimately rely on continuous affirmation. Facts can persist only by being publicly recognized, and such recognition cannot be enforced from above. The fate of factual truth in the public realm is therefore not a matter of epistemology but one of authority.

Authority relations, as Arendt defines them, are both voluntary and hierarchical: “where force is used, authority itself has failed”; and “[w]here arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance” (*BPF*: p. 92). Authority cannot be defended by either coercion or arguments; in itself, it is essentially powerless (p. 122). Thus, what experts can do, as authorities, is only to affirm and augment political events and decisions. They cannot command a certain course of action. The authority of experts, like that of the Roman *patres*, “lies in it being mere advice, needing neither the form of command nor coercion to make itself heard” (p. 123). Hence, from an Arendtian perspective, expertise is constitutional not only in the sense that science and academic knowledge can assist in delimiting the space where political opinions can make sense but also in the sense that expert authority cannot be sustained by force but only
through voluntary affirmation. Facts, like constitutions, have no power in themselves. The implication is that the stability they bring is not inalienable. Expertise can only operate as a stabilizing element in the public realm if it is recognized.

When facts become politically contested, experts cannot protect the boundary between politics and knowledge by commanding public agreement. Hypothetically, it would of course be possible to impose laws against science denial or devise other coercive measures to make expert gatekeeping more effective. However, such measures would merely substitute coercion for authority, rather than restoring the authority of science and academic knowledge.

In this regard, the Arendtian perspective appears more similar to the procedural approach. Yet, in contrast with the procedural approach, Arendt rejects the notion that authority relations can be renewed through public deliberation (cf. Warren 1996). Authority cannot be resurrected through a resort to “the forceless force of the better argument” (see Habermas 1999b: p. 332). An order based on rational discourse – where the speakers participate on an equal footing in a contest of better arguments – could possibly be understood as the type of order that exists within the academic world, in principle if not in practice. The ideal of rational discourse is the ideal of a seminar culture. A political order modeled on this notion of public discourse, therefore, is one where personal status is irrelevant and where all participants must agree to respect the rules of reasoning, so that the competition between arguments can lead to agreement on valid conclusions. According to Arendt, this type of discourse presumes equality (BPF: p. 92). Genuine deliberation, in her view, is unattainable in large-scale contexts. The deliberative ideal could hardly stand as a viable model for the relationship between experts and non-experts in the public realm because this relationship is hierarchical per definition. Citizens cannot participate on an equal footing with the experts in a contest of scientific arguments. They lack the relevant background knowledge – the playing ground is not level. Neither is it likely that scientific experts will regard non-expert citizens as their equals and remain open to the possibility that the debate could lead them to change their minds. Thus, from an Arendtian perspective, when the public conversation turns into a contest of scientific arguments or a debate about facts, this is an indication of a failure of authority, not a viable strategy for bringing it back.

In the contemporary debate on post-truth politics, it has been suggested that we need an “army” of intellectuals prepared to dispute the falsehoods and conspiracy theories that circulate on social media. However, Arendt’s analysis suggests that a different approach is needed. For example, the Swedish writer and critic Ola Larsmo (2023) argues that all reasonable people – intellectuals and historians – must now be mobilized in the war against propaganda on social media. “[T]he propaganda becomes true if no one is there to dispute it. […] This is why I think more historians should pay attention to digital media platforms. What good does historical knowledge do if it remains within the closed rooms of academia? Professional historians...
of the concept of authority offers reason to be skeptical of such initiatives. Experts cannot defend their authority by agreeing to compete with science deniers in a competition of better arguments. According to Arendt, such discussions, lacking a common factual foundation, are inevitably futile and destined to devolve into “a farce”. At worst, they might further blur the boundary between politics and knowledge. By entering into these debates, the experts tacitly acknowledge their adversaries as legitimate contenders, which means that they could potentially end up reinforcing the public perception of science denialism as a legitimate stance. The danger, therefore, is that the expert could unintentionally contribute to the erosion of the very boundaries they seek to uphold. When even experts seem to accept that elementary facts are up for debate – as if they were opinions – little remains of the factual constitution for public discourse.

Another risk is that the debate itself may devolve into a distortion. A debate between a climate scientist and a climate denier, for instance, is not likely to meet the criteria of genuine deliberation. Rather than an authentic exchange of arguments, where the participants are open to the possibility of changing their minds in the course of the discussion, debates over factual knowledge tend to deteriorate into a weaponized form of discourse where the different sides seek to combat each other with words. The distinction between deliberation and polemics lies not only in procedure but also in the spirit of the participants. When arguments are presented not to persuade but to force the other into agreement, what we have is no longer a sincere intellectual exchange but a word fight. As Arendt observes, such discourse does not foster understanding but leads instead to the devaluation of public speech:

Many well-meaning people want to cut this process [of reaching understanding] short in order to educate others and elevate public opinion. They think that books can be weapons and that one can fight with words. But weapons and fighting belong in the realm of violence, and violence, as distinguished from power, is mute; violence begins where speech ends. Words used for the purpose of fighting lose their quality of speech; they become clichés. The extent to which clichés have crept into our everyday language and discussions may well indicate the degree to which we not only have deprived ourselves of the faculty of speech, but are ready to use more effective means of violence than bad books (and only bad books can be good weapons) with which to settle our arguments (EU: p. 308, emphasis added).

From an Arendtian perspective, expert authority cannot be asserted through force or violence, not even metaphorically. Waging a war against science denialism is futile, whether it involves protesting in the streets against public...
disrespect for science, or writing books for the purpose of combating post-truth. Such actions are mere gestures, meaningless clichés that only serve to further degrade public discourse. What they symbolize is not a powerful political defense of truth or a personal commitment to academic ideals, but the frustration that arises from the failure of expert authority to make itself heard in the public realm.

Arendt posits that authority relations always derive their legitimacy from a source external to its own powers (BPF: p. 97). The Roman senators, for example, derived their legitimacy from the faith in the sanctity of the city’s foundation. I have suggested that expert authority similarly relies on a belief in progress. Arendt herself was deeply critical of the modern notion of progress, seeing it as linked to the idea of human history as a law-bound process. The idea that humanity progresses toward a higher form of existence was in her view incompatible with the notion of human dignity (see LKPP: pp. 3-5). However, in modern democratic societies, it is precisely the belief in progress—broadly understood, as denoting the faith in science and academic knowledge as a pathway to a better world—that enables experts to speak from a position of authority and thereby bring an element of constitutional stability to the political realm. Thus, in this view, the crisis of expertise can be seen as illustrating a loss of faith in the future, and a disillusionment with the promise of scientific progress. In times where the advancement of science is characterized as an “arms race”, and where the pace of the technological development appears to frighten and overwhelm even the scientists themselves, public skepticism regarding the emancipatory promise of science cannot easily be dismissed as mere irrationalism. This underscores Arendt’s argument that science and academic knowledge are not automatically empowering. Without reflection on the meaning of scientific theories and findings, even knowledge can become a source of enslavement.

Public faith in the promise of science and academic knowledge cannot be achieved through either coercion or rational deliberation. Experts cannot defend their authority in the public realm by engaging in word fights with science deniers. Instead, the crisis prompts reflection on how experts can convey their knowledge in a manner that upholds freedom. As Linda Zerilli (2016)

23 In an interview from 1972, cited in Samantha Rose Hill’s biography, Arendt tells a story of one of her first encounters with the American editors who had proofread her English for a publication in the Partisan Review. “I read the article and there of all things the word ‘progress’ appeared. I said: ‘What do you mean by this, I never use that word’, and so on. And then one of the editors went to the other in another room, and left me there, and I overheard him say, in a tone of despair, ‘She doesn’t even believe in progress’ (Arendt 1972, as cited in Rose Hill 2021: p. 111).

24 The development of AI technology is a case in point. This development is not only met with fear by reactionaries but also by the very people who are behind it. Notably, some of the scientists and business executives who have a leading role in the development and commercial distribution of AI—including the Swedish-American physicist Max Tegmark and the industrial tycoon Elon Musk—wrote an open letter in March 2023, demanding that all AI labs pause their research for six months (Future of Life Institute 2023).
argues, Arendt’s point was never to dispel factual claims from the realm of politics but to caution against the dual risks surrounding the relationship between knowledge and politics. The issue is not only that facts can be denied in the name of politics, but also that “they can be used to deny human freedom whenever they are presented in the manner of logical truth, with the latter’s specific sense of necessity” (p. 137). Factual truths can be denied in favor of political interests; however, they can also be wielded in ways that deny human freedom. Therefore, the problem is not only that human beings may use their freedom to deny inconvenient facts but also that we may deny the contingency of factual truths. This occurs when our historical situation is depicted as the inevitable outcome of predetermined causes, and when the future is dominated by the logic of TINA, “There Is No Alternative”. This suggests the need for experts to strike a very fine balance: they must avoid presenting facts as either opinions or necessities but convey them in a manner that acknowledges both the facticity of the present and the openness of the future:

The political attitude toward facts must, indeed, tread the very narrow path between the danger of taking them as the results of some necessary development which men could not prevent and about which they can therefore do nothing and the danger of denying them, of trying to manipulate them out of the world (BPF: p. 254).

When we apply the Arendtian perspective to the crisis of expertise, we can see that the ills of the contemporary public realm – such as science denial, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propagandistic narratives – cannot be remedied through either coercion or rational deliberation. Instead, the crisis underscores the importance of initiating and cultivating public conversation that can foster joint reflection on the meaning of knowledge. Such conversations must acknowledge basic facts as their boundaries while accommodating a plurality of viewpoints on the issue. What is needed, therefore, is not an “army” of experts prepared to dispute lies and propaganda in the public realm, and neither should scientists and academics invite the skeptics into their seminar rooms. Rather, the experts can serve as a stabilizing element in public discourse by initiating and cultivating public conversations where basic facts are not in question, and where a plurality of perspectives can be gathered around the issue under discussion.

The Public

Experts are not only scientists and scholars but public figures who represent their field of knowledge in the public realm. In Sweden, the public dimension of the academic vocation is commonly referred to as “the third assignment”. Besides teaching and conducting research, scholars and scientists are also assigned a task in the public realm, which is now termed “collaboration” in the
Swedish Higher Education Act (1992:1434). This act states that “[t]he mandate of higher education institutions shall include collaboration for mutual exchanges with the surrounding community, as well as ensuring that the knowledge and expertise found at the higher education institution bring benefit to society”. The distinction that I have suggested between science and expertise has to do with the context in which the knowledge appears: while scientists and scholars participate in discussions about research, experts participate in public discussions about issues of common concern.

In this section, I will turn to Arendt’s concept of the public realm to elaborate on what it means to perceive expertise as a public vocation. As we will see, Arendt’s notion of the public realm differs from how the concept is understood by neo-Kantian theorists like Rawls and Habermas. While advocating different normative conceptions of public reason, these theorists share the assumption that political rules and decisions are legitimate only if they can be justified to all members of society. In other words, these theorists understand the democratic public realm as the production site of universal justifications. In contrast, Arendt perceives the public realm as serving a dual role of grounding our sense of political identity and reality. By gathering us together around issues of common concern, the public realm enables us to identify issues of common concern as our concern while creating a space for plurality and disagreement. Additionally, by providing visibility to a plurality of viewpoints, the public realm enables us to experience the world as “objective,” as having a reality that extends beyond that of our subjective feelings and fantasies.

Arendt’s conception of the public realm allows for the construction of a new notion of expertise as a public vocation. In this view, the point is not to contribute to a universal procedure of reason-giving, aiming for conclusions that no one could reasonably deny. From the Arendtian viewpoint, public discourse is not a procedure for reaching agreement but a space for freedom. Thus, the public vocation of experts is not to foster agreement but to initiate and cultivate public conversations that have the power to keep gathering us around the issues we have in common, even when we are inescapably divided in our opinions about them.

**The Arendtian Public Realm – A “Home” or a “Stage”?**

The concept of the public, Arendt writes, brings together two distinct, but in her view interrelated, phenomena. First, the public signifies visibility, which means “that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity” (HC: p. 50). The public realm is therefore a realm of appearances – an open space where objects, events, people, and deeds can be seen and affirmed from a variety of viewpoints. Second, the public also “signifies the world itself, in so far as it is a common world to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it” (p. 52). As we saw in Chapter 3, ‘the world’ is for Arendt something different from earth
and nature. The world is not “natural” but related to the artifact, the human-made object, and can therefore be understood as the (non-private) “home” that humanity has built for itself. In other words, the Arendtian public realm is not only defined by its visibility but also by its artificiality: its durable “objectivity”, or as Arendt also describes it, its “thing-character” (p. 93).

Arendt’s notion of the public realm has generated a variety of conflicting interpretations. The disagreement, I suggest, does not come from a theoretical inconsistency but from the ambiguity of Arendt’s metaphorical language. At some places in her work, Arendt describes the public realm as a space of appearances – the “stage” for political drama and extraordinary events, or the “arena” for great political deeds. In other places, she describes the public realm as our reliable “home”, the safe “shelter” that offers us protection from the barbarism of the turbulent forces of nature and society. In *On Revolution*, Arendt describes the act of constituting a public realm as analogous to building “a house where freedom can dwell” (*OR*: p. 28). There is a clear tension between the two images. Should we think of the Arendtian public realm as the site of political drama and competition, an open space for public spectacles and battles, where citizens compete with one another for fame and glory? Or should we rather think of it as our safe and reliable home, a place that transforms strangers into citizens and integrates us all into a common community? The tension between these two images is reflected in the secondary literature, where different scholars have assumed widely different interpretations of Arendt’s concept of the public.

According to Seyla Benhabib (2000), Arendt’s ambiguous notion of the public realm reflects her personal struggle to combine a commitment to moral and political universalism with a recognition of the particularity of identity. On her account, Arendt’s theory is torn between two distinct conceptions of the public: one ‘agonistic’ and one ‘associational’ (ch. 5). These two models correspond with the metaphors described above – whereas the agonistic model conceptualizes the public as a competitive space where citizens try to outshine each other in a quest for immortal glory, the associational model conceptualizes it as a realm that comes into existence through our ‘action in concert’, i.e., a space that springs out of the cooperation between human beings in the plural.

There is no question as to which of the two conceptions Benhabib prefers. What she admires in Arendt is her emphasis on human plurality and her insight into the intersubjective nature of action: that action is always interaction and that political power is therefore essentially a product of human cooperation. The more agonistic elements, by contrast, are in her view a result of Martin Heidegger’s influence on Arendt, an influence which manifests itself as an anti-modern sentiment and a fascination with the politics of ancient Greece. Thus, while Benhabib takes inspiration from the more republican aspects of Arendt’s political thought, she also suggests that the Arendtian notion of politics is unviable under modern conditions.
According to Benhabib, the home-like character of the Arendtian public realm is problematic, not only because it privileges an old-fashioned notion of politics as based on direct, face-to-face interaction but also because it appears to presuppose a fair degree of ethical homogeneity among the citizenry. Unless the people acting together can unite around a common framework of understanding, how else would they be able to recognize the meaning of their actions? Consequently, while Benhabib commends Arendt’s notion of the public realm as the source of civic identity – the place where a political collective, ‘the People’, can crystallize and come to recognize itself – she also contends that Arendt’s conception of the public needs adjustment to fit with the realities of modern politics. To develop a political theory for our time, we must assume a “de-substantialized” version of the Arendtian public realm:

The fiction of a general deliberative assembly in which the united people expressed their will belongs to the early history of democratic theory. Today our guiding model has to be that of a medium of loosely associated, multiple foci of opinion-formation and dissemination which impact each other in free and spontaneous processes of communication (Benhabib 2000: p. 10).

Essentially, Benhabib proposes that Arendt’s notion of public space needs to be replaced with a more Habermasian notion of a public sphere: a more loosely integrated communicative network, an “anonymous conversation” (1997: p. 17) that connects different nodes of opinion-formation in civil society. On this account, the public is still understood as the source of political identity and integration. However, it is no longer understood in terms of physical space but as composed of a more abstract system of communication that includes also semi-private groups or clubs that, in Arendt’s view, may be considered part of the ‘social’ more than the ‘public’.

Benhabib’s interpretation of Arendt as a republican thinker stands in stark contrast with that of Dana Villa (1992). On his account, Arendt’s emphasis is not on the intersubjective character of political action, but on its non-instrumental, non-sovereign character. Arendt’s goal, Villa argues, is to challenge the instrumentality that governs the Western tradition of political thought since Plato – that is, to challenge the tendency to reduce the meaning of politics to that of some higher end. On this interpretation, Arendt is not a republican political thinker or the forerunner to deliberative theorists like Habermas and Benhabib. According to Villa, Arendt is much more of a Nietzschean in that she, too, turns to the realm of aesthetics in her attempt to develop an alternative conception of politics:

Their strategies are remarkably similar: they respond to the Platonic instrumentalization of action and its degradation of the world of appearances by self-consciously aestheticizing action. This means that the
standard categories for analyzing action (e.g., motives, goals, consequences) and the conception of agency they presuppose are put aside: action is now seen in terms of performance (Villa 1992: p. 276, italics in original).

According to Villa, Arendt’s intellectual aspiration is to restore the dignity of politics by elucidating its element of virtuosity. In his view, Arendtian politics is performative more than it is integrative, and the Arendtian public realm should therefore be understood as a “stage” more than a “home”. The public is our arena for political performances, a place that is defined by its “virtuosity, agonism, and theatricality” (1992: p. 275). It is not the site for cooperation in pursuit of shared goals, but the arena for extraordinary events and new beginnings, whose value or meaning cannot be deduced from moral categories, because such categories “cannot do justice to the performance of action in the public realm, for here we encounter a phenomenon whose very nature verges on the miraculous” (p. 281).

While Benhabib highlights the more cooperative and intersubjective elements of Arendt’s political thought, Villa emphasizes its more agonistic dimensions. There is some truth to both these interpretations. However, I suggest that they both misinterpret the underlying aim of Arendt’s theoretical project. As Villa correctly notes, Arendt’s aspiration is not, as Benhabib seems to argue, to develop a more solid, more universal, normative foundation for democratic politics. Arendt was indeed inspired by Nietzsche’s contention that “God is dead”, and that we have thereby lost the privilege of being able to appeal to absolute values.

However, as Jeffrey Isaac (1993) points out in a reply to Villa, Arendt’s rejection of the moral and epistemic categories that dominate the Western tradition of political philosophy was not simply an act of intellectual rebellion. It was the conclusion she arrived at in her effort to come to terms with the events of her own time – imperialism, the rise of consumer society, the Cold War balance of terror, and most of all, the emergence of totalitarianism. In her view, the rise of Nazism and Stalinism demonstrated the extent to which absolute values had already lost their authority in the realm of human affairs, and the extent to which our traditional concepts and categories had lost their ability to assist our understanding of modern political experiences. After the war, the tradition was shattered, and for Arendt, this demonstrated the need for developing a new political vocabulary. In other words, Arendt’s concern was not with “the tradition” as such. Her concern was with our ability to “think what we are doing”, and more specifically, with how to preserve this ability even when our traditional concepts and categories have ceased to assist us in this endeavor. When Arendt laments the eclipse of the public realm, her concern is not that we have lost the arena for political performances, the space where politics can be recognized as “immanently valuable in its greatness or
beauty” (Villa 1992: p. 276). Her worry, rather, is that we have lost the space that assist our ability to understand and respond to a rapidly changing reality.

What both Benhabib and Villa fail to address in their respective accounts, I suggest, is the emphasis that Arendt places on the fabricated, durable, material character of the public realm: its “thing-character”. The Arendtian public realm, I argue, is not primarily a site for political cooperation, nor is it primarily a site for political competition. Rather, the Arendtian public realm must be understood first and foremost as a space occupied by public things: institutions (e.g., parliaments, public libraries, schools, and hospitals), infrastructure (e.g., roads, buildings, public transport), and the issues of common concern that arise in relation to them. On Arendt’s account, the public realm has the power to gather us together exactly because it is made up of things that we have in common, even when we are deeply divided in our opinions about them. It is this power of the public to both relate and separate human beings that Arendt alludes to when she describes the public realm as a “table”:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them (HC: pp. 52-53).

As we can discern from this much-cited passage from The Human Condition, the power of the public to both integrate and separate its citizens is intrinsically linked to its nature as an intermediary space. The world of things opens a space for political interaction – activities that arise out of a shared concern for the things that lie in between us. This perspective suggests that the role of the public realm is neither to assimilate us into a singular identity nor to serve as a stage for greatness and glory. Instead, the public serves to gather us around shared objects and issues. It thereby enables a sense of political membership that does not require us to merge into a single identity or to unite behind a common viewpoint. This political identity does not arise from a process of rational deliberation but from sharing a common world of objects such as schools, parliaments, museums, architecture, literature, etc., and from engaging in the practice of sharing our views on the issues that arise in relation to them.

By putting objects in between subjects, the public realm offers a space where citizens can both agree and disagree, associate and compete, and relate to one another through “objective relationships”, that is, relationships that are not founded on a common nature, identity, or opinion, but on a shared concern.
for common objects. As Margaret Canovan (1985) remarks, Arendt’s conception of the public is not only distinct from mass society, where individuals are isolated and pressed together into a mass, governed by the needs and logic of life itself. The Arendtian public realm also diverges from the notion concept of community. Warmth and intimacy, Arendt contends, are qualities that belong to the private realm of love and friendship. In politics, by contrast, we must set such feelings aside and interact with our fellow citizens in a spirit of impartiality and solidarity. Consequently, the function of the public is not only to bind citizens together but to also offer them a political arena where “there is enough space between people for them to stand back and judge one another coolly and objectively” (Canovan 1985: p. 632).

Res Publica – Our Thing

Public things are indispensable to democratic politics. This is the general argument of Bonnie Honig’s book Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair (2017). Honig, who positions her contribution against the neoliberal wave of privatization in recent decades, notes that democratic theorists have paid most attention to the procedures for making democratically binding decisions, or to the virtues of its participants. The “stuff” of politics, however, has often been overlooked in theoretical discussions about democracy. Yet without such substance, democratic politics becomes hollow and empty, “reduced to procedures, polling, and policing, all necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient conditions of democratic life” (p. 4).

Drawing on Arendt and the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1896-1971), Honig argues that the role of public things in democratic politics can be understood as analogous to the idea of a ‘holding environment’ in development psychology (2017: pp. 47-48). A holding environment, according to Winnicott, is both uncomfortable and safe: it must be sufficiently uncomfortable to push the child into further development, yet safe enough to allow it to experiment with new ways of being and acting. In Arendt’s theory, the public realm represents something similar: it is our holding environment for political change. As Honig writes, the Arendtian public realm “‘consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers’. We vest Things with meaning, but Things also anchor and orient us, she says” (p. 39). The public realm brings permanence and continuity to politics: we are born into a world of institutions and objects that were here before we entered it, and many of these things will remain in the world long after we have passed (HC: p. 55). Still, the continuity of our common world also depends on our care for it. It is the durable thing-character of the public realm that makes it sufficiently stable to allow us to “experiment” in politics, and to fail in our endeavors without having to face a disaster, the end of the world. But the things of the public realm are also created by human beings, and they can survive only through our continued care for them.
Honig distinguishes the thing approach from the approaches that conceptualize the public as ‘the commons’ or a ‘shared space’. These approaches are complementary rather than competitive, and they all have in common that they call our attention to the scenes of democracy rather than its subjects. However, Honig argues that it is only by perceiving the public realm as a realm of common things that we can attain a properly democratic notion of political membership. If we think of the public primarily in terms of ‘the commons’ (i.e., as connected to the natural resources on which we all depend) or a ‘shared space’ (i.e., as the arena of events and the competitive marketplace of ideas), we will end up with a notion of citizenship that is either too collectivistic or too individualistic (2017: pp. 90-91). It is the mediation of common objects that makes possible a notion of political membership that is fit for democracy: a membership that integrates us while allowing us to keep our distance; a relationship that demands our care and concern, while also granting us sufficient stability to fail in our endeavors and start over.

Public things hold citizens together and are held together, in turn, by our shared concern for them. By attending to the things they have in common – for example, the local school in a village – people can relate to one another without having to collapse their differences. Their ways of interacting with each other can be agonistic as well as cooperative: it is their concern for the common thing, the school, that gathers them together, not that they agree on their opinions about it or their compliance with the procedures by which their disagreements can be settled. The school establishes a relationship between all those who are connected to it, but this relationship does not depend on the sameness of the people involved. The relationship is sustained by their continued care and concern for the school – not by their convergence on a common identity, lifestyle, or opinion. However, the object will lose its meaning unless it is affirmed continuously by the people who stand related to it. Without people coming and going, who care for and argue about it, the school would no longer be a school at all, but just an empty remnant. Yet, its meaning and existence extend well beyond the activities and perspectives of single individuals. Teachers can quit, children can drop out, parents can ignore the parent-teacher meetings, and the school will still be there. It is held together by human speech and action, and its true meaning can only be traced through the plurality of perspectives held by the people who have it in common.

Publicity, ‘Objectivity’, and Expertise

The public realm bestows a specific sense of ‘objectivity’ to democratic politics. The type of objectivity that Arendt describes, however, is not the outcome of a universal procedure of reasoning. Her idiosyncratic notion of objectivity is of a dual kind. First, by putting objects in between subjects, the public realm enables us to establish objective relationships, i.e., relationships that bind us together with strangers, who may be very different from ourselves in terms of
their lifestyle, opinions, or personal experiences, but with whom we are nevertheless related through our shared concern for common things. A relationship of this kind is not objective in the sense that it is modeled on a procedure that generates universally valid results, but in the sense that it is based on objective concerns rather than personal allegiances. Second, the public realm also grounds our sense of belonging to an objective reality. The maximal visibility of public things means that they can be seen and affirmed from a variety of perspectives. The public realm grounds our sense of reality by allowing us to see the same thing from a variety of viewpoints, to examine it from a variety of angles and attend to its various aspects without it changing its identity. Objectivity in this sense is not a feature of the conclusions we arrive at when we follow a certain procedure of reasoning: rather, it is the experience that arises from our ability to “see sameness in utter diversity” (HC: p. 57). The public realm grounds our sense of reality by inviting us to see it from multiple points of view:

Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the “common nature” of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object. […] The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective (HC: pp. 57-58).

When Arendt writes about “objectivity”, she puts the word in scare quotes. Arendtian “objectivity” differs from how we usually understand the meaning of the word. It is not the quality of being confirmed from a standpoint beyond or above the realm of human perspectives, which would then render all other perspectives superfluous and further discussion unnecessary. Instead, it is a quality that accompanies objects that are seen and affirmed in their identity from a variety of standpoints. According to Arendt, reality is in this sense a political achievement because we can experience things as objectively real only when they are affirmed from multiple viewpoints. For example, a scientific fact – that the global temperature is rising due to human activities – can be perfectly objective in the sense that it has been corroborated by scientists in several carefully designed studies, and still suffer from a lack of “objectivity” in the sense of being experienced as vague and hypothetical, a fact on paper but not a reality that cannot be avoided or explained away. This latter type of objectivity is not a matter of determining a single right conclusion. According to the Arendtian perspective, the “objectivity” of public speech is not guaranteed by universal norms of discourse. Our sense of reality is not achieved by adhering to a method or procedure – rather, it is extended by discussions that engage multiple perspectives on the same thing.
Neo-Kantians assume that political decisions and institutions are legitimate only if they are justifiable, in some sense, to everyone over whom they purport to have authority. This suggests that public discourse serves the purpose of engaging its participants in a joint search for reasons that no citizen could reasonably deny. The legitimacy, and hence the stability, of the democratic order is sustained by the universal norms of public reason. For Rawls (2005), this means that the participants of public discourse must avoid reasons that are unacceptable to citizens who hold different but reasonable worldviews. For Habermas (1999a; 1999b), it means instead that they should aim for a public conversation modeled on the norms of an ideal speech situation, because it is only through an ideally just, inclusive, and rational conversation that universally acceptable reasons could begin to materialize.

Like Rawls and Habermas, Arendt also sees a connection between publicity and objectivity. However, on her account, objectivity is not guaranteed by a universal procedure of reasoning; instead, it is sustained by our ability to see the same world from various points of view. Arendt’s notion of the public and the “objectivity” she attaches to it has implications for how we perceive expertise as a public vocation. From an Arendtian perspective, expertise is public in the sense that it relates to our ways of gathering around common issues. The expert vocation is not about sustaining a universal procedure of reasoning; rather, it is about constituting a public space for attending to common issues. The issues that merit concern in the public realm may differ from scientific issues that concern scientists and academics in their role as researchers. For example, methodological issues carry great weight in a research seminar but are less relevant in the public realm, where the focus is on understanding an event or situation for the purpose of judging and acting in response to it. Nevertheless, there is certainly a huge overlap between the concerns of scientists and the concerns of the public: all, or nearly all, discussions about issues of common concern can draw on relevant findings and theories from the academic realm of research.

In contrast with theorists like Rawls and Habermas, Arendt’s concern is not with the problem of how to contain disagreement. The main issue is not how to demarcate the realm of opinion but how to take a plurality of opinions into account. The real threat against our sense of reality, in Arendt’s view, does not come from relativism but from the radical subjectivism that emerges when we lose the public spaces where the world can be seen and confirmed from more than one perspective. The problem with modern mass society is therefore not that it encompasses too many, or too divergent, perspectives, but that it has lost its power to gather us around common issues, which in turn jeopardizes our ability to relate to them “objectively”.

“The end of the common world”, Arendt writes, “has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective” (HC: p. 58). Such situations can arise either under conditions of loneliness and isolation, “where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else, as
is usually the case in tyrannies”, but also under conditions of “mass hysteria”, where people begin to “behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor” (ibid). Either way, the loss of perspective has the effect of imprisoning people “in the subjectivity of their own experience, which does not cease to be singular if it is multiplied innumerable times” (ibid).

Arendt’s point is that our political engagement with issues of common concern underwrites their reality. Her notion of an objective reality is relativistic in that it acknowledges that the world appears different depending on our position in it. Just as physical objects appear differently depending on where we stand in relation to them, so will issues of common concern appear differently depending on our position in the world. Perspectives and opinions are not objective in an absolute sense – “no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective” (PP: p. 128). However, neither are they in themselves distorting, and they are corrigeble only by other perspectives.

As Linda Zerilli (2016) asserts, Arendt diagnoses modern mass society as a situation “in which we have not too many but too few perspectives from which to see the world”, and hence, “it is not adjudication but pluralization and the expansion of the common world that should concern us” (p. 38, italics in original). This does not mean that we should naively welcome any opinion – even those premised on denial of basic facts – as a pathway to democratic renewal. What it means, however, is that scientific knowledge can be experienced as fully real only if we gather around and discuss its meaning. Knowledge can acquire a lasting reality in the public realm only by becoming more than a set of truths that compel unanimous assent.

Arendt’s notion of reality as a political achievement, I suggest, highlights the distinction between science and expertise. In their role as experts, scientists are not engaged in the production of new knowledge. Their role is to make knowledge public – to utilize existing scientific findings, academic perspectives, and theories to illuminate politically relevant issues, such as climate change, AI, or COVID-19. Through the work of experts, science and academic knowledge can become a matter of common concern, not just a matter of interest to the scientific community. From an Arendtian perspective, making something public is a political enterprise that can only be accomplished by bringing together a plurality of viewpoints. Publicity is not merely a matter of making information publicly accessible. Scientific facts can become truly public only if they are actively attended to and talked about. Therefore, expertise, as public knowledge, must be more than information or a set of truths. It must be something to gather around, or a way of gathering.

For example, scientific knowledge about climate change can become a reality in this sense only by gathering a variety of views around it: not only
perspectives from natural science but also from the social sciences, the humanities, and non-academic perspectives based on ordinary experiences. By extending the space of discussion, we can acquire a clearer and broader view of the world. Our sense of reality – the fundamental conviction that the world exists objectively, not just hypothetically or as a subjective state-of-mind – is upheld through interaction with people whose positions and perspectives differ from our own. According to the Arendtian perspective, thus, the point is not to eventually arrive at a common opinion or rational consensus; rather, it is to expand our field of vision, to get the common world into proper view, and to search continuously for the meaning of public facts and events.

There is a strong affinity, I suggest, between Arendt’s concept of the public and the notion of Dingpolitik developed by the French philosopher Bruno Latour (2004; 2005). Dingpolitik, Latour argues, represents a more realistic approach to politics than that which we associate with the term Realpolitik. What he proposes is a shift in political style that involves, among other things, a transition in focus from ‘matters of fact’ to ‘matters of concern’. “Reality”, Latour asserts, “is not defined by matters of fact. […] Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called states of affairs” (2004: p. 232, italics in original). A more realistic representation of reality requires us to move the discussion beyond the facts. According to Latour, reality would be better served if we extended the scope of debate: instead of reducing the issue under consideration to its basic elements, its ‘matters of fact’ – partial pieces of information that command universal assent – public issues could be more realistically constructed if we would approach them as ‘matters of concern’, that is, as concerns that we can gather around and have different perspectives on.

When matters of fact lose their power to serve as a common basis for discussion – when they are used instead as instruments to command agreement and begin to split up into ‘facts’ and ‘alternative facts’ – our strategy should not be to mobilize even more factual information to compel agreement with our own perspective. Rather, Latour suggests that our focus should be on matters of concern, that is, matters that are sufficiently “objective” to withstand conflicting opinions about them. Instead of fighting alternative facts with more facts, we could try moving the discussion to a different arena: an arena capable of assembling a multitude of perspectives on a common matter of concern.

Expertise as a Public Vocation

To sum up, Arendt’s conception of the public diverges from how the concept is understood by neo-Kantian thinkers like Rawls and Habermas. According to Arendt, the purpose of public discourse is not to seek universally acceptable justifications. Instead, it is about maintaining our connection with the common
world. Our relationship with the world is not natural but a political achievement; we can maintain it only by sharing it with others. Only by gathering around common concerns, the world can properly enter our field of vision and present itself to us as a shared reality.

I have argued that Arendt’s concept of the public is not merely a space for cooperative deliberation or agonistic contestation. Rather, it is defined by its “thing-character.” The public realm is a realm of things: fabricated and durable objects that can lend relative permanence to human affairs, providing a stable space for human beings to interact and exercise their freedom to begin anew. The Arendtian public realm is not a procedure that generates any determinate results; rather, it is a space for speech and action, a “house where freedom can dwell” (OR: p. 28).

This conception of the public invites us to rethink the relationship between public discourse and democracy. According to this perspective, the public realm corresponds with the human need for belonging. Public discourse therefore serves a dual function in democratic politics: first, it fosters a sense of political membership and identity based on ‘objective relationships,’ connecting strangers through their shared concern for common objects; secondly, it grounds our sense of belonging to a shared reality, our ability to sense the objective reality as existing beyond the realm of private sensations.

Like Rawls and Habermas, Arendt identifies a connection between publicity and objectivity. However, Arendt’s idea of objectivity is idiosyncratic. Arendtian “objectivity” is not a metaphysical or epistemic ideal; it is not the quality of being validated from a position above or beyond the realm of human perspectives. Rather, it is the quality of objects that can be seen in a variety of aspects and discussed from various standpoints without disintegrating. Our viewpoints are formed through interaction with others – in this regard, Arendt is essentially in agreement with the procedural approach. Yet, for Arendt, the intersubjective character of opinion-formation does not mean that we can overcome the subjectivity of our viewpoints. The public realm allows us to expand our view of the world; however, our perspectives can never acquire universal validity.

With Arendt, we can see that reality is not just an ontological entity – it is a political achievement. Issues like climate change can become a reality in the public realm only if they are made into focal points of public gatherings. A political realism of this kind is not a matter of determining a single right answer or solution by claiming a position above or beyond the realm of human perspectives; rather, the whole point is to extend the reality of the matter under consideration, by bringing its many aspects into the light of the public. It is by assembling around common concerns and taking a plurality of opinions about them into account that we become able to experience them as fully real – that is, as belonging to a reality that cannot be ignored or explained away. For Arendt, as for Latour, opinion does not stand opposed to objectivity; in fact,
opinion and perspective are its enabling conditions. This suggests that scientific knowledge can become a reality only if it is made public, which means, in turn, that it must become something more than just a set of facts in a stream of information – it must become a matter of concern that can assemble a plurality of opinions around it.

This conception of the public suggests that the scientific ideal of objectivity does not quite apply to expertise, understood as public knowledge. Experts do not compromise their objectivity by discussing the meaning of their knowledge in more political terms, or by sharing their expert opinions about some politically contested issue. Indeed, it is by bringing their knowledge to bear on issues of common concern and addressing other perspectives on those issues that they can contribute to making them into a public reality. A scientific, like climate change, can be routinely ignored by almost everyone unless it is made into a public reality. By using their knowledge to illuminate common issues and by initiating conversations across disciplines and perspectives, the experts can assist us in making science and academic knowledge into more than a set of facts. By making it public – a focal point of a public gathering – issues like climate change can move from fact to reality.

In their public vocation, experts must not only relate their knowledge to common issues but also do so in a manner appropriate for politics. According to Arendt, “[u]nderstanding is unending and therefore cannot produce final results” (EU: p. 308). We should therefore not approach public conversations as a quest for truth or conclusive answers. The issues that merit consideration in the public realm – for instance, events like wars, knowledge about climate change, and the anticipated effects of new technologies like generative AI – bring together a range of affected parties who think and feel differently about them. The public realm provides a space for gathering around these issues, not a method or procedure for overcoming our differences. Thus, according to this perspective, the expert vocation does not correspond with the need for valid conclusions but with the need for a more realistic view of the world, which we can acquire only by extending from our limited, individual perspective on it. In this public vocation, experts must shift from a scientific, proof-giving style of discourse to a more political (but not partisan) rhetoric: a style of discourse that preserves a legitimate space for further engagement from other perspectives rather than treating the issue as a scientific question that should be settled in light of the best available evidence. In essence, when scientists operate in the public realm as experts, they must orient themselves in a realm of judgment, not truth.

Judgment

Arendt’s concern is not with how to organize political life to reach reasonable solutions to common problems. Her focus is on freedom, and more specifically, on freedom as a condition in need of continuous affirmation. With her
theory of judgment, which she did not live to finish, Arendt sought to develop an account of the mental activity by which human beings affirm their freedom. In her view, judging is the activity by which human beings can resist a thoughtless surrender to the forces of necessity and assume the burden of their freedom. Thus, by drawing on Arendt’s work on this human faculty, I aim to develop an idea of how to respond constructively to the predicament defined in Chapter 3 – an idea of what it means to push back against alienation and affirm our freedom to begin the world anew. In what follows, I will examine Arendt’s concept of judgment to see how it can help us develop a new notion of what it means for citizens to shoulder the burden of judgment that comes with their new role as experts on experts, and consequently, what it could mean for the experts to support them in the process.

*Freedom and Thoughtlessness*

Before turning to Arendt’s concept of judgment, let us take a moment to recapitulate her notion of freedom and the threat posed to it in modernity. Arendtian freedom is not an internal state. She explicitly rejects both the negative concept of freedom as freedom from intervention and the positive concept of freedom as autonomy or sovereignty. Drawing on Nietzsche, Arendt observes that the will only speaks in commands: “What is called ‘freedom of the will’ is essentially a passionate superiority toward a someone who must obey. ‘I am free; ‘he’ must obey’ – the consciousness of this is the very willing” (*LMW*: p. 161). Sovereignty is premised on the submission of all others, who must adhere to the commands of the sovereign for its will to reign supreme. Arendt therefore contends that freedom is not actualized in willing at all. Sovereignty is in her view not only inconsistent with freedom but opposed to it: “Where men […] wish to be sovereign, they must abolish freedom. But if they wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce” (*TWB*: p. 233).

Arendtian freedom resides in the human capacity to begin anew. This freedom is experienced in action – it resides in the “I-can”, not in the “I-will” – and it therefore requires the company of other people because “no one can act alone” (*TWB*: p. 66). Arendt acknowledges that her notion of freedom is indebted to the theologian Augustine, who described human beings as “newcomers” and “beginners by virtue of being born”\(^{25}\). Through speech and action, human beings can insert themselves into the world and initiate a new beginning, a kind of “second birth” that introduces novelty into existence. Yet,

\(^{25}\) Arendt traces her notion of ‘natality’, the second birth implied in action and speech, to a passage in Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*: “[Initium ] ergo ut esset creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit (“that there be a beginning, man was created, before whom there was nobody”) […]. This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is the beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before” (*HC*: p. 177).
Arendt also acknowledges that freedom cannot reside solely in the human capacity to initiate new events. At the end of her volume on *Willing* – the second part of the *Life of the Mind*, which was published posthumously in 1977 – Arendt contends that all available conceptions of freedom, even the Augustinian one, seem to lead us to an impasse:

I am quite aware that the argument even in the Augustinian version is somehow opaque, that it seems to tell us no more than that we are doomed to be free by virtue of being born, no matter whether we like freedom or abhor its arbitrariness, are ‘pleased’ with it or prefer to escape its awesome responsibility by electing some form of fatalism” (*LMW*: p. 217, italics in original).

Arendt’s reflections on this impasse were motivated by her encounter with Eichmann. As noted in Chapter 3, Arendt argued that Eichmann embodied an evil that was “banal” in the sense that it was altogether superficial. His crimes appeared to her to have no depth, no roots in personal motives. Instead, his actions seemed to reflect his inability to think and his unwillingness to make up his own mind on how to respond to the surrounding world and its events. Eichmann’s crimes were monstrous, but on Arendt’s account, Eichmann himself was no monster. He was not a great villain but a pathetic man, and his character was defined primarily by his lack of imagination and his desire to climb the career ladder and impress his superiors. What was wrong with Eichmann, Arendt argued, was his lack of judgment, his utter inability to think what he was doing.

In Arendt’s view, Eichmann’s example not only illustrates the limits of our conventional conceptions of evil. It also reveals a lacuna in our understanding of freedom. Our freedom to act – the “I-can” – cannot be sustained on its own. Eichmann could have acted differently, so how can we understand the fact that he didn’t? Arendt’s answer to this question is that he was unable or unwilling to think what he was doing. He never made up his own mind about the crimes he committed but simply resigned to the forces of his surroundings. This observation guided Arendt’s inquiry into the relationship between thought and action and sparked her interest in the mental operation by which human beings affirm their freedom.

“The Other Side of Action”

The encounter with Eichmann led Arendt to the idea that freedom is not experienced in action alone. The freedom to begin is not only about initiating new events. Events can become new beginnings only if they are affirmed in their significance – and our freedom to begin anew is therefore also a matter of judgment. In judging, human beings make up their own minds on how to respond to the reality in which they live. They affirm their freedom and accept the price for it. Unless we engage in the judging operation, our interventions
into nature and society will not be manifestations of freedom but of thoughtlessness. Without the faculty of judgment, connecting thought with action, we lose our human capacity to begin and become helpless creatures – unable to withstand the forces of nature or society, and thus prepared to be swayed by the ideological force of an idea, or to even be enslaved by our own know-how (see HC: p. 3). Thus, Arendt acknowledges that action itself does not automatically amount to freedom. This insight prompts the question of how to distinguish free acts from thoughtless ones. What does it mean, more precisely, to exert our freedom to begin anew?

Arendt’s notion of new beginnings has puzzled many of her readers. Her idea of authentic action has sometimes been interpreted as something rare, spectacular, and extraordinary (see e.g., Canovan 1978; Kateb 2000); however, at other times, it may seem as something almost pedestrian, as if new beginnings are bound to appear, miraculously, if we only adopt the right mindset. As Patchen Markell (2006) observes, this tension in Arendt’s thought resembles the familiar tension in democratic theory between the notion of democracy as a form of rule and the notion of democracy as unruliness. Traditionally, democracy has typically been understood as a political order, a specific form of government where the people rule supreme. Yet in recent decades, this understanding of democracy has been challenged by radical democrats who insist that ‘the People’ cannot exist as a unified, ruling entity, but only as an unruly multitude of diverging interests, identities, and opinions (see e.g., Hardt & Negri 2005). This conception of democracy, however, not only appears to challenge our conventional theories of democracy but also the very notion of democracy as a specific form of politics, distinct from anarchy.

The democratic tension between order and revolution, exceptionality and ordinariness, is reflected in Arendt’s concept of action. However, Markell suggests that there is a way to alleviate this tension. Arendt’s idea of new beginnings, he argues, should not be understood in an objectivist sense, as a matter of performing the improbable. To begin is not the same as defying statistical probability because new beginnings can be found even in events that are likely and expected. When Arendt writes that even foreseeable events can have the power to “change everything” (EU: p. 320) her point is not to stress that even our most well-grounded predictions always involve some degree of statistical uncertainty. Rather,
According to Markell, novelty should not be interpreted as an essence that resides in the event itself, which could then in principle be measured and assessed “by a neutral observer of history, standing outside of time” (p. 7). Instead, new beginnings arise “precisely out of an agent’s attunement to [the past] as an irrevocable event, and therefore also as a new point of departure” (ibid). Understanding, therefore, is integral to our capacity to begin anew. Our freedom to take the present as our point of departure, an occasion to respond, depends on our ability to comprehend the meaning of past experiences and events – not only to know the facts but to understand their significance.

Understanding and knowledge, for Arendt, are distinct but related: understanding extends beyond knowledge; it is what makes knowledge meaningful (EU: p. 311). It is by coming to terms with what happened, by reconciling ourselves with what inevitably exists, that we can attune to the world and acquire the understanding that prepares us to respond, to begin anew. Such attunement is not the same as a passive resignation to the facticity of the world; rather, it is a state of reconciliation that opens us to the possibility of taking action, to respond. By coming to terms with the world as it inevitably is, and reconciling ourselves to that which we cannot change, we are allowed to take the reality of the present as our point of departure.

Arendt has sometimes been interpreted as a revolutionary or even anarchic thinker (see e.g., Kateb 2000; Herzog 2004). Others have interpreted her view on politics as inherently ambivalent, oscillating between openness and closure (Keenan 2003). In response to these conflicting interpretations, Markell suggests that Arendt’s emphasis on the “miracle” in action should not be interpreted as an anarchic rejection of order and predictability, or a celebration of political disruption and drama. Rather, her point is to emphasize the worldly contexts where events can acquire meaning, and to alert us to the conditions under which we can attune and respond to reality as it really is. At one place in her work, Arendt describes this attunement to reality as the operation that allows human beings “to articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow” (HC: p. 208). Markell elaborates on this passage and asserts that the act of articulating and calling something into full existence is precisely what prepares us for freedom. As he nicely puts it, “There is no way to undo what has been done, no way not to suffer it – but you can do more than merely suffer it: you can take it as your point of departure. You can, in short, begin” (2006: p. 10, emphasis in original).

Linda Zerilli (2016), who commends Markell’s interpretation of new beginnings as contingent on our ability to attune to the world as it really is, adds that such attunement to reality must not be understood as a matter of adopting the right mindset. The understanding that prepares us to act cannot be attained simply by adopting the right attitude or by cultivating a certain state-of-mind. The understanding that prepares us to begin anew – that reconciles us to reality so that we can take it as our “point of departure” instead of experiencing it as
a “point of aggression” (see Rosa 2016), an occasion for resignation or destructive ressentiment26 – is not a matter of psychology. For Arendt, attunement is not achieved through mindfulness, individual acceptance, or a stoic indifference to the outside world. Rather, as Zerilli asserts, our ability to understand and reconcile ourselves to the common world must be understood politically, as grounded in judging as a shared practice (2016: pp. 201-2). According to this interpretation – which I believe is correct – Arendtian freedom is not experienced in action alone but also in passing judgment. Hence, Arendt’s concept of judgment must indeed be recognized as “the other side” of her theory of action (EU: p. 322).

Kant’s Concept of Reflective Judgment

Arendt did not live to finish Judging, which was going to be the third and final part of her trilogy on the vita contemplativa, the life of the mind. What Arendt left to the afterworld cannot be described as a complete theory of judgment. Nevertheless, her work on this faculty – most thoroughly presented in the posthumously published collection Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (1992), edited by Ronald Beiner – has proven a rich source for scholarly interpretation and debate. As we have already seen, the second volume of The Life of the Mind ends with an impasse. What Arendt finds is that none of our existing theories of freedom, not even the Augustinian one, seem able to escape it. If human beings are free by virtue of being born, then how can we avoid the conclusion that freedom is our “doom”, a condition that we cannot help, even if we are unable to “feel pleased” with its tremendous arbitrariness and awesome responsibility (LMW: p. 217). With the third volume, Judging, Arendt planned to develop an account of what she saw as the solution to this impasse. As Beiner asserts, we therefore have good reasons to attempt to reconstruct her fragmentary account of judging, because, without this missing piece of her argument, our understanding of the two prior parts of the trilogy will also remain deficient and incomplete (Beiner 1992: p. 89). The same, I would add, goes for her entire theory of political action.

Arendt develops her concept of judgment in dialogue with, and against, Immanuel Kant. In his second critique – the Critique of Practical Reason (1788) – Kant argues that human beings are free when they are governed by

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26 Ressentiment, for Nietzsche, is the emotional condition of individuals who feel inferior or wronged. This condition, and in fact, all thirst for vengeance and domination, arises from the impotence of the will: that it cannot will “backward” and undo what inevitably is. Ressentiment is a refusal to accept the impossibility of willing backward, and it therefore prevents our ability to reconcile oneself with the world and to take it as one’s point of departure. Commenting on Nietzsche’s discovery of the impotence of the will, Arendt writes that “the Will’s impotence persuades men to prefer looking backward, remembering and thinking, because, to the backward glance, everything that is appears to be necessary. The repudiation of willing liberates man from a responsibility that would be unbearable if nothing that was done could be undone” (LMW: p. 168). When human beings are consumed by ressentiment, they are tempted to deny their own freedom, absolving themselves of responsibility for actions that cannot be undone.
the laws of their own reason. This work is canonical in political theory. This is where Kant presents his moral theory and articulates the categorical imperative, an idea that has had a tremendous influence on contemporary theorists like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. The categorical imperative is the highest principle of practical reason, which states that you should “[a]ct so that the maxim of thy will can always at the same time hold good as a principle of universal legislation” (Kant 1788/2009: p. 46).

However, in Arendt’s view, this principle has little relevance for political relationships. The categorical imperative applies to the relationship between me and myself, my own conscience, but it is not readily applicable to the political relationship between human beings in the plural (BPF: pp. 216-217). Morality commands us to obey the laws of our own reason. In politics, however, the issue is not how to live in agreement with one’s own self, but how to co-exist in some kind of harmony with everybody else. Therefore, instead of taking her recourse to Kant’s theory of practical reason, Arendt turns to his aesthetic theory, which he develops in his third critique – the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790). This move has sometimes been interpreted as an attempt to “aestheticize” action (see e.g., Kateb 2000; Beiner 1992; Villa 1992). However, as Arendt herself explains, her interest in Kant’s third critique is not motivated by an interest in aesthetics but by her belief “that the way in which we say ‘This is right, this is wrong,’ is not very different from the way in which we say ‘This is beautiful, this is ugly’” (TWB: p. 481). Both art and politics belong to the realm of appearances. In this realm, Arendt insists, we must be prepared to confront our experiences head-on, without falling back on any preconceived rules or systems.

Kant’s third critique examines the question of how to reconcile the subjectivity of experience with the intuition aesthetic judgments can claim a validity beyond that of mere preferences of taste. At the core of Kant’s theory lies his concept of judgment, which is our faculty for dealing with particulars. He distinguishes between two types of judgments: determinant and reflective. Determinant judgments are the ones we make when we apply a concept or a general rule to a particular. For example, when we say, “All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal”. Reflective judgments, by contrast, come into play when no general rules or concepts are available, and we therefore must discern the general in the particular. For example, when we say, “What a beautiful rose!” we do not arrive at this judgment by subsuming the particular rose under a rule or concept, i.e., by appealing to a general proposition such as “All roses are beautiful”, or “Beauty is roses” (LKPP: pp. 13-14). In situations like these, we must extract the general quality – beauty – from the particular object without subsuming it under a rule or concept. We cannot judge the beauty of a rose by subsuming it under a rule or concept, because there are no general standards of beauty from which we can descend. What we have is only the particular object – this specific rose – and we must therefore judge it solely on experience: we must ascend from our experience.
of the particular to a concept of greater generality. According to Arendt, it is precisely situations like these, where we must form a judgment without relying on any preconceived standards, that demonstrate the power of judgment as an independent faculty. It is in these situations, where no general rules or concepts are given, that we must rely entirely on our judgment.

While Kant articulated his concept of reflective judgment as part of his aesthetic theory, Arendt insists that the third critique should be read as the political book he never wrote (LKPP: pp. 7-10). There is an important affinity, she argues, between art and politics: both deal with appearances and hence depend for their existence on a public realm. In this realm, Arendt argues, “it is not cognition and truth, but judging and deciding that are crucial” (TWB: p. 182). Politics shares with aesthetics a fundamental openness and indeterminacy. In art and politics alike, our arguments “carry no obligation” in that they “cannot prove anything conclusively” (ibid). In the public realm, our arguments do not have the force of conclusive proof, and agreement on premises does not compel agreement on conclusions. We can only, as Kant puts it, “woo everyone’s agreement” (ibid). Thus, in the realm of politics, as in the realm of aesthetics, we cannot rely on proof or evidence. Instead, we must appeal to the imagination and common sense of our interlocutors – to their ability to visit our point of view, and thus imagine what the world looks like from that perspective. As Zerilli (2005a) explains, this connection between the aesthetic and the political does not imply that genuine agreement is impossible or that arguments are futile. Her point, rather, is that “[political] agreement cannot be reached through the giving of proofs” (p. 170) and that public opinion-formation has its own modus operandi, which differs profoundly from the mode in which we assert our claims to truth.

It should be stressed, however, that art and politics are by no means the same. Arendt’s appropriation of Kant’s third critique is not, as some have suggested, an attempt to import aesthetic standards into the realm of politics (cf. Villa 1992; Kateb 2000). Arendt does not seek to substitute the usual moral and epistemic standards with a new set of aesthetic standards, like beauty or glory. Indeed, the reason why she turns to Kant’s concept of reflective judgment, and not to his theory of practical reason, is precisely because it allows us to understand how judging is possible even in the absence of all such standards.

According to Arendt, the modern world is characterized by a loss of authoritative standards (see e.g., PP: p. 104; TWB: p. 328). There is little left for modern human beings to appeal to. Whether we like it or not, people have lost their faith in absolutes – in heaven and hell – and conventional moral truths have thereby lost their authority. We may still repeat these truths frequently enough, as slogans, but they can no longer stand as a common foundation. The same holds true for our traditional concepts and categories for understanding, which, according to Arendt, have lost their power to elucidate contemporary political experiences. In this situation, which both prompts and frustrates our
need for understanding, we must rely on our ability to “think without banisters”. Although the modern world has suffered a loss of standards, and although this has certainly provoked a crisis of understanding, all is not lost:

Even though we have lost yardsticks by which to measure, and rules under which to subsume the particular, a being whose essence is beginning may have enough origin within himself to understand without pre-conceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality. If the essence of all, and in particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action, namely, that form of cognition, distinct from many others, by which acting men [...] eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists (EU: p. 321).

In Kant’s concept of reflective judgment, Arendt finds a mental faculty that mirrors her concept of action in that it encapsulates the essence of beginning. Judgment, like action, is a human faculty that demonstrates our human capacity to bring novelty into the world: new events, or new understanding. In a world that has lost its former foundations, we must now rely on our judgment in our efforts to recover our sense of orientation and start over.

Reflective judgment, as we have seen, enables us to acquire understanding without deriving it from general rules or concepts. In forming a judgment, we acquire an understanding that is “not arrived at by either deduction or induction” but has “its own way of proceeding” (LKPP: p. 4). This mental operation is defined by a fundamental indeterminacy: in matters of judgment, we cannot prove anything but only “woo” the agreement of all others. However, Kant’s concept of reflective judgment is not only characterized by its indeterminacy but also by its sociability. The central insight that governs Kant’s reflections on this human faculty, Arendt asserts, is his insight into the depth of human interdependency – “that men are dependent on their fellow men not only because of their having a body and physical needs but precisely for their mental faculties” (LKPP: p. 14). Therefore, Kant’s concept of judgment not only mirrors action in that it embodies the human capacity for novelty but also in its indebtedness to human plurality. Just as no one can act alone, so does our faculty of judgment depend on the condition of plurality. We can only begin to understand the world by acknowledging that no single individual “can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world only shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which corresponds to his standpoint in the world and is determined by it” (PP: p. 128). To see the world “objectively” we must entertain the views of other people. Or, as Kant asserts, “[c]ompany is indispensable for the thinker” (cited in LKPP: p. 10, Arendt’s emphasis).

In Thinking, Arendt describes the thinking faculty as a silent Socratic dialogue between me and myself (LMT: pp. 179-193). When thought is deployed
in the service of judgment, however, this dialogue must extend beyond its solitary processing of individual experience. It must take the perspectives of others into account. Arendt calls this form of cognition ‘representative thinking’ (BPF: p. 237). By making present the views and voices of other people – by re-presenting them – we can extend the circle of silent discussion, and travel in our mind from one perspective to another. Representative thinking is not the same as rational deduction: it proceeds through imagination, not calculation. Neither should it be mistaken for empathy. Representative thinking, Arendt asserts, is not an attempt “to be or to feel like somebody else” but a way of “being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not” (ibid).

By thinking representatively, we attain a position that Kant terms ‘enlarged mentality’ (LKPP: pp. 42-44). This is the position we obtain when we remove ourselves from the subjective, private conditions that apply only to our own perspective (“that is, disregarding what we usually call self-interest”), and extend our view by traveling in thought from one perspective to the next (p. 43). To think with an enlarged mentality does not generate any knowledge about what is true or right. It does not tell us how to act. What is achieved is “a viewpoint from which to look upon, to watch, to form judgments, or, as Kant himself says, reflect upon human affairs” (p. 44). Enlarged mentality is, essentially, a position from which to form judgments: judgments that are impartial in that they have been cleared of the idiosyncrasies that clutter our own subjective view of the world, and that are general in the sense that they have been formed by taking a plurality of perspectives into account (pp. 43-44). It should be stressed, however, that an enlarged mentality is not an Archimedean point: the impartiality of our judgments is never absolute, and their generality cannot transcend the realm of human perspectives. The viewpoints that we have considered in the process of forming an opinion never cease to be particulars, and the kind of validity we can claim for our judgments is never universal but remains bound to the world as it is experienced by human beings.

Arendt’s Political Existentialism

Judging, in Arendt’s view, is distinct from both the scientific practice where one seeks to verify or falsify empirical claims, and from the philosophical style of reasoning which is concerned primarily with the meaning of general concepts such as justice or the good. Judgment is our faculty for thinking the particular and it proceeds through persuasion, not proof-giving. We can never claim a truth-like validity for our judgments, but neither should they be understood as “mere opinions”, or as manifestations of a groundless will. Judging is not a sovereign enterprise: we can move from prejudice to judgment only by entertaining the views of other people. Although judging requires solitude – that we withdraw from the world to “stop-and-think” (LMT: p. 78) – the thinking involved in forming a judgment must nevertheless stay in touch with the common world and the people in it. Thus, what Arendt proposes is
that our human faculty of judgment is no less reliant on the condition of plurality than action. Unless we were able to keep each other company, in the world and in our imagination, judging would be impossible.

The faculty of judgment is enabled by our worldly co-existence and our ability to imagine what the world looks like from other points of view. By considering a plurality of viewpoints, we can extend our view of the matter under consideration. However, we cannot eliminate the subjective quality of our opinions completely. The outcome of the judging operation – that is, the judgment or opinion that one eventually arrives at – ultimately comes down to a decision. The judging subject must always proceed from a subjective viewpoint, the *dokei-moi* – the “it-seems-to-me” – of the judging subject.

While human beings can extend their field of vision and judge from the position of an enlarged mentality, they cannot transcend the realm of human perspectives as such. In *Introduction into Politics*, Arendt asserts that judgments are not the same as prejudices (‘pre-judgment’) – but she also contends that the existence of prejudices in politics and in everyday life “is not something we should bemoan as such, or for that matter attempt to change” (*PP*: p. 99). ‘Prejudice’, in her terminology, is not the same as intolerant convictions but refers to all unexamined opinions: it encompasses everything that we take for granted, all beliefs and assumptions that we simply assume, without further reflection. A life without prejudices, Arendt argues, would be humanly impossible. Not only because of the limits of time and intelligence “but also because such a total lack of prejudice would require a superhuman alertness” (ibid). While Arendt agrees with the Enlightenment notion that “it is the task of politics to shed light upon and dispel prejudices”, she rejects the idea that this means that politics should “train people to be unprejudiced or that those who work toward such enlightenment are themselves free of prejudice” (pp. 99-100). Prejudice and pre-understanding are not an ill that we should try to eliminate; it is the departure point from which the judging operation must proceed.

According to Arendt, the thinking process involved in forming an opinion is endless in principle, because in matters of judgment, we can never reach a single right solution or form an opinion that is completely liberated from all prejudice. The judging operation cannot transcend the realm of perspectives entirely – it can only travel sideways, from one perspective to the next. This means that we can never claim a truth-like validity for our judgments. In Arendt’s view, there is no compulsion involved in the act of judging something, not even the inherently rational compulsion which Habermas describes as “the forceless force of the better argument” (1999b: p. 332). In the final analysis, the judging person must make up their own mind on where they stand. Arendt characterizes this decision as a matter of “choosing one’s company” (see *RJ*: pp. 145-146; *BPF*: pp. 220-222). This choice is not compelled by either truth, reason, or beauty. In judging, we are free to say, as Cicero did, that we “prefer
before heaven to go astray with Plato rather than hold true views with his opponents” (*BPF*: p. 221).

This is where Arendt diverges most radically from deliberative theorists like Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib. While both Habermas and Benhabib commend Arendt’s insights into the intersubjective nature of action and power – her notion of politics as constituted by a web of relationships, and her conception of the public as held together by the power that springs up in between human beings (Benhabib 2000: p. 112; Habermas 1977: p. 8) – they also critique what they perceive as her failure to establish a normative foundation for her theory. As Habermas remarks, Arendt doubts whether it is possible to “specify a critical standard” by which to “distinguish between illusionary and nonillusionary convictions” (p. 22). Instead, she sticks to an old-fashioned distinction between theory and practice and leaves “a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion that cannot be closed with arguments” (p. 23). Similarly, Benhabib argues that Arendt’s notion of judgment is either inconsistent or incomplete, because, even though she describes judgment as our faculty for telling right from wrong (see *LMT*: p. 193), she nevertheless insists on a “problematic separation of morality from politics” (Benhabib 1988: p. 31). What is missing from Arendt’s theory, according to these theorists, is a cognitive foundation that can “be claimed [also] for the power of common convictions” (Habermas 1977: p. 23), and a normative principle that can ground the moral obligation of citizens to engage in the “procedure” of representative thinking (Benhabib 1988: pp. 44-48).

Arendt’s apparent anti-rationalism has puzzled even many of her admirers. For example, Ronald Beiner writes, “it is not clear how we could make sense of opinions that did not involve any cognitive claims […] or why we should take seriously opinions that assert no claims to truth (or do not at least claim more truth than is claimed by available alternative opinions)” (*LKPP*: p. 137, italics in original). Surely, a person who has at least some knowledge of the issue in question must be a better judge than one who has no knowledge or prior experience with the issue whatsoever. Why else would we find it valuable to hear the expert view, and not just the opinion of some randomly selected person on the street?

Indeed, Arendt never develops a cognitive foundation for her theory. However, this is not an omission on her part. Again, her concern is with a different problem: the problem she tries to solve is not the problem of adjudication – i.e., how to judge correctly, or how to distinguish between illusory and non-illusory convictions – but the problem of *how to affirm freedom*. Furthermore,
Arendt does not provide a moral standard\(^{27}\) because it is precisely the powerlessness of such standards that prompts her reflections in the first place. This is why she turns to Kant’s concept of reflection judgment, and not to his theory of practical reason.

At several places in her work, Arendt insists that the experience with totalitarianism must be approached as not only a humanitarian crisis but also as a crisis of understanding. The totalitarian regimes demonstrated that “everything is possible”, which only seemed to prove that “everything can be destroyed” (\textit{OT}: p. 459). This frightening insight applies also to our moral beliefs. According to Arendt, the totalitarian experience demonstrated that our moral standards were neither eternal nor self-evident but nothing but a “a set of \textit{mores}, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people” (\textit{RJ}: p. 50). When the chips are down, our moral convictions are unlikely to save us. This is the reason why Arendt never developed a foundation for her political theory. Not because she thinks all distinctions between right and wrong are inherently arbitrary, or because she endorses a kind of \textit{laissez-faire} morality where anything goes, but because she rejects the idea that moral truths are given to us by nature or reason. No matter how sound or indisputably valid our moral convictions may appear from a philosophical point of view, such abstractions will be powerless unless they are politically recognized and affirmed in the public realm. In her view, the lesson to be learned from totalitarianism is not that human beings can go terribly wrong in their attempts to distinguish right from wrong, but rather, that they can resign from the task itself, and hence deny their own freedom and responsibility.

In conclusion […] our decisions about right and wrong will depend on our choice of company, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives. And again, this company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present. In the unlikely case that someone would come and tell us that he would prefer Bluebeard for company, and hence take him as his example, the only thing we could do would be to make sure

\(^{27}\) However, Arendt does address the question of evaluative standards. In this part of her work, she draws not on Kant but on Montesquieu to develop a notion of action as inspired by ‘principles’. According to Montesquieu, different political regimes are inspired by different principles and can remain stable only insofar as that principle remains the dominant motor of action. The principle that keeps a tyranny ticking is ‘fear’; in a monarchy, it is ‘honor’; and in a republic, it is ‘virtue’, i.e., the willingness to put the interests of the community ahead of one’s personal interests. Unlike standards, principles are not oriented toward an end. They do not operate with a means-ends rationality; rather, they are the fundamental convictions, shared by a group, that “move human beings to act” (\textit{PP}: p. 195). The conviction that inheres in a principle cannot be codified in moral or legal laws but can only be manifested in action. As Lucy Cane (2015) explains, “an actor who is inspired and guided by ‘virtue’ should not be understood as acting in order to bring about virtue. Instead, she should be understood as acting virtuously, or for the sake of virtue” (p. 63).
that he would never come near us. But the likelihood that someone would come and tell us that he does not mind and that any company will be good enough for him is, I fear, by far greater. Morally and even politically speaking, this indifference, though common enough, is the greatest danger. And connected to this, only a bit less dangerous, is another very common modern phenomenon, the widespread tendency to refuse to judge at all. Out of the unwillingness or inability to choose one’s examples and one’s company, and out of the unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment, arise the real skandala, the real stumbling-blocks which human powers cannot remove because they were not caused by human and humanly understandable motives. Therein lies the horror, and at the same time, the banality of evil (RJ: pp. 145-146).

Arendt is sometimes portrayed as a deliberative theorist. However, I suggest that this way of characterizing her work is misleading. Arendt certainly stressed the importance of public speech; however, her theoretical outlook is not deliberative but is better described as a form of existentialism – albeit an “existentialism politicized”, as Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (1991) have put it. In important regards, Arendt is influenced by thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Kierkegaard. At various places in her work, she asserts that the old standards are no longer reliable and that we can no longer safely fall back on traditional guideposts. She frequently reiterates a verse from the French resistance poet René Char: “Our inheritance was left to us by no testament” (see e.g., BPF: p. 3). The thread of tradition is broken, which means that everyone is now free to help themselves by taking whatever they prefer from the fragments of the past and using whatever thoughts or experiences they can find to illuminate the present.

In the conventional Enlightenment narrative, the breakdown of traditional society marks the beginning of emancipation. What Arendt alerts us to, however, is that the breakdown of religion and authority has also brought our tradition to ruin. We can no longer safely rely on the traditional toolbox of concepts and categories for navigating the moral and political domains of the present. Without the thread of tradition to guide us, the burden of judgment now falls directly on us: the distinction between right and wrong, illusion and reality, is now inescapably ours to make.

Arendt’s characterization of the modern situation, I suggest, resonates with our contemporary crisis of expertise. When expertise itself becomes politically disputed, there is no magic rule or procedure that citizens can use to dispel the uncertainty and disagreement. There is no supreme or universal standard that can instruct us in how to correctly adjudicate between competing knowledge claims in the public realm. We can, of course, evaluate experts in terms of their past records or academic merits. However, we may still find that even the best-qualified experts disagree among themselves, or that the issue that we try to understand does not quite fit with the standard models or explanations.
In such situations, citizens are thrown back on their own judgment and required to assume the role as experts on experts.

However, what Arendt argues is not that there are no remedies to hope for. What she advocates is not an ethos of self-sufficient heroism, suggesting that modern human beings must now rise to the task and be strong enough to create their own meaning. Her response to the modern predicament is not to conclude, with Max Weber, that the modern individual must now either learn to “bear the fate of the times like a man”, or abandon all public aspirations and withdraw, simply and quietly, into the private realm, where “[t]he arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him” (Weber: 1919/2009: p. 155). Arendt’s existentialism is neither individualistic nor heroic but political.

When considering what a constructive Arendtian approach to the modern predicament could look like, we must recall her notion of judging as a shared practice. Political opinion-formation is not a rule-bound procedure, nor is it the public manifestation of a groundless will. It is, quite simply, the shared practice by which we bring the common world into view by taking the perspectives of others into account. This activity is not about counting heads, but about “learning how to count these other perspectives as revealing something about the world” (Zerilli 2016: p. 39, italics in original). This sharing-the-world-with-others grounds our ability to judge, our ability “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (LMT: p. 193). In other words, we do have grounds for judging, but, on Arendt’s account, these grounds are not found in universal reason or human nature. Instead, we must take our bearings from the views and experiences of the people whose company we wish to share. The good judge, in Arendt’s view, is someone who knows how to choose her company, “among men, among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as in the past” (BPF: p. 222). Today, we may say that the role of citizens is to exert such good judgment in their choice of experts.

The Redemptive Power of (Expert) Storytelling

When we apply Arendt’s existentialism to the question of expertise, we can see that there are no universal rules or methods that we can safely rely on to distinguish authentic knowledge claims from inauthentic ones. If we put too much faith in general rules and methods, there is a risk that we could become tempted to regard our own views as derivatives of a universal law (see Disch 1994). However, we must also avoid the conclusion that we cannot judge at all, or that all opinions are equal and that distinctions cannot be made.

According to Arendt, the judging operation involves two steps. First, we must engage in speech and imagination with the perspectives of others, not merely acknowledging their existence but taking them into account, as perspectives revealing something about the world. The wider the circle of people whose views we have been able to consider in the process of forming a judgment, and the better we have been able to represent them, the more valid our
judgments will be. But the opinion we eventually arrive at will never have an absolute or truth-like validity. Representative thinking broadens our view but it does not generate any determinative conclusions. It is not a “procedure”, and opinions are not “results”.

Second, in judging, we must eventually make up our minds. We must make a decision and “choose our company”. In this step, we move from the free play of imagination into forming an actual judgment, based on the understanding that can be attained from a position of enlarged mentality (see LKPP: p. 68). The type of understanding involved in this operation differs from that which we can get from an empirical or philosophical argument. It is not a conclusion but an understanding that reconciles us with the world and allows us to make peace with it.

Arendt describes understanding as that which enables us to “come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists” (EU: pp. 321-2). As Leslie Paul Thiele (2005) observes, “[t]his coming to terms occurs through the crafting or interpreting of narratives” (p. 707). Arendt’s notion of “storytelling” must be understood in a very general sense: it encompasses everything from causal anecdotes, literature, intellectual essays, and, I suggest, expert accounts of common issues. Storytelling involves the type of thinking that orders experience for the sake of making sense of it. By “putting the story into shape” (TWB: p. 444), we acquire an understanding that transcends knowledge and experience – the story reveals the meaning of facts and events.

Stories have the capacity to redeem us to the world. “Through narratives, worldly life becomes meaningful and tolerable. The human condition is redeemed by judgment to the extent that it gains coherence” (Thiele 2005: p. 708). Or, as Arendt asserts in her essay on Isak Dinesen28: “The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” (MDT: p. 104). Experience and knowledge – sorrow and bliss, good news and bad news, exciting discoveries, and inconvenient truths – all of it can become bearable only through storytelling. “We tell ourselves stories

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28 In her essay on the life and work of Dinesen (the pseudonym of the Danish writer Karen Blixen), Arendt not only commends Dinesen’s storytelling but also her insight into the meaning and significance of this human practice. For Dinesen, Arendt writes, stories had a redemptive quality: “Stories had saved her love, and stories saved her life when disaster had struck. ‘All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them’” (MDT: p. 104). The story yields a silent acceptance “that also is the genius of true faith”, and this acceptance “rises out of the story because in the repetition of imagination the happenings have become what [Dinesen] would call a ‘destiny’” (ibid). But quite apart from the religious metaphors, it is clear that Arendt sees a political meaning in this type of acceptance that comes from stories well told. On the next page, she writes: “It is true that storytelling reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it, that it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are, and that we may even trust it to contain eventually by implication the last word which we expect from ‘the day of judgment’” (p. 105). The story creates acceptance of the world as it is and hence prepares us to judge, but without sacrificing the plurality and openness that is constitutive of human freedom.
to live”, writes Joan Didion; but, as Dinesen also contends, a story is well told only if it remains “loyal to life” (*MDT*: p. 97). Storytellers can support our understanding only if they remain true to the reality they depict. They must therefore resist the temptation to take shortcuts: to substitute the real and authentic with wishful fantasies or worn-out clichés, or to provoke reactions by exploiting the shock value of cheap effects. A good story must do justice to its characters, their actions, and the situations they encounter. Essentially, a good story does not distract from reality but rather expands it through our imagination.

Stories create coherence out of the mess of experience. In her interview with Roger Errera, Arendt describes this as a great philosophical puzzle. The future is unknown to all of us; yet, in hindsight, we can put the events together into a coherent, meaningful story:

The trouble […] is the following: we don’t know the future, everybody acts into the future, and nobody knows what he is doing, because it is the future that is being done. […] Only if I were the only one could I foretell what’s going to happen from what I do. Now this makes it look as though what actually happens is entirely contingent, and contingency is indeed one of the biggest factors in all history. Nobody knows what is going to happen simply because so much depends on an enormous amount of variables; or, in other words, on *hasard*. On the other hand, if you look back on history, then retrospectively – even though all this was contingent – you can tell a story that makes sense. How is that possible? That is the problem for every philosophy of history. How is it possible that in retrospect things always look as if they could not have happened otherwise? The variables have disappeared; reality has such an overwhelming impact on us that we ignore what is actually an infinite variety of possibilities (*TWB*: p. 495).

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29 Stories lose their ability to generate understanding when they are told not for the sake of depicting reality, but for fighting a cause, no matter how admirable (see *EU*: pp. 308-9). As Lisa Disch (1993) argues in her essay on Arendt’s storytelling, loyalty to reality rules out both polemics and detached objectivity. The polemic style “relies on a ‘pre-articulated’ normative framework and functions not to initiate discussion but to settle it” (p. 672). It does not invite understanding or activate the judgment in others but attempts to compel or force, thus degenerating into either cynicism or superficial banalities. However, loyalty to reality is also sacrificed in the detached objectivity of scientific lingo. When accounting for matters of concern to us, as human beings, we cannot describe these matters in a neutral tone without reducing and misrepresenting their significance. For Arendt, it was a “methodological necessity” to situate her account of totalitarianism in the context of her own outrage against the extermination camps, “because to describe a social phenomenon out of context of the moral response it provokes is to deprive it of part of ‘its important inherent qualities’” (p. 679). According to Arendt, thus, it is more objective to describe the Nazi concentration camps as “hell on earth” than to describe them neutrally. Similarly, Seyla Benhabib (1990) aptly describes the Arendtian style of narration in terms of “moral resonance”. The moral resonance of a narrative “does not primarily reside in the explicit value judgments which an author may pass on the subject matter; rather such resonance must be an aspect of the narrative itself. The language must match the moral quality of the narrated object” (p. 186).
We weave stories together to create coherence and meaning, to make sense of the situation in which we find ourselves. This sense-making fosters reconciliation with the facticity of the world. When we understand how and why we ended up in the present, we are better equipped to endure it and to resist the temptation of denying reality as it is. Narratives have the power to impose order on chaos, and they thereby support our ability to eventually “come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what inevitably exists” (EU: p. 322). The story creates acceptance of that which we cannot change and hence provides us with a stable point of departure from which to act into the future. As Arendt suggests in the interview with Ferrara, our human need for such stability and coherence is so strong that we repeatedly forget that we cannot apply the retrospective gaze on the future and, so to say, try to tell the story in advance.

Storytelling not only brings stability and coherence but also identification and impartiality. By engaging our imagination, the story establishes some distance from the immediacy of our own experience of the world, enabling us to engage with it in a more impartial manner. It offers us a “de-sensed” experience, an experience that is not sensed immediately but re-lived through imagination (see LMT: p. 87). Thus, the story creates distance from experience, allowing us to process it intellectually rather than merely reacting to it. However, imagination also allows us to bridge distances. Stories not only establish distance from experience – they also cultivate proximity by inviting us to think and feel from positions that are not our own. Imagination therefore enables both impartiality and identification. It provides distance from the immediacy of sensation while fostering familiarity with the unfamiliar.

The understanding that we acquire through narratives is, in a sense, more demanding than that gained from arguments. The meaning of a story does not follow automatically; rather, the point is to engage the imagination of the reader or listener and urge them to do their own interpretation. Stories do not provide us with a method or a set of rules. However, they offer guidance through examples, thus revealing “meaning without committing the error of defining it” (MDT: p. 105). For instance, the story about Achilles offers a classic example of courage, which supports our ability to understand the meaning of this concept. Narratives do not give the answer away, they demand our interpretation and active engagement with the unfamiliar. Nonetheless, narratives offer guidance through context and example. By inviting the reader or listener to see the world as imagined by the storyteller, they relieve us from the humanly impossible task of having to create meaning on our own, of having to relate to the world as a self-sufficient, sovereign being.

The storytellers that Arendt has in mind are writers, poets, and historians. However, in this dissertation, my focus is not on literature but on expertise, which I argue plays a similar role in supporting public judgment. The role of experts in the public realm is not only to inform citizens and policymakers
about scientific knowledge but also to make sense of it, and what they contribute to public life are not just facts and arguments but expert accounts. An expert account is a form of storytelling in that it is an attempt to convey meaning. When scientists take on a public role as experts, their task shifts from producing new knowledge to making sense of it. This “sense-making”, which I will further discuss in Chapter 5, involves the crafting of an account: a “story” that brings coherence and meaning to what would otherwise be a vast, unintelligible mass of information. When facts and assumptions are woven into a narrative, they lose their arbitrariness and begin to “make sense”. As I will argue in the final chapter, expert storytelling holds a unique role in the contemporary public realm – not because scientists are better storytellers than people on average but because they hold a position of authority, allowing them to speak and pass judgments from an elevated standpoint. Thus, in their role as public storytellers, the experts have a unique capacity to support the relentless quest for reconciliation with an ever-changing world.

Concluding Discussion

According to the classic Enlightenment narrative, modernity marks the beginning of an era of emancipation. The modern break with tradition is typically regarded a moment of liberation: in modernity, human beings have been granted the freedom to use their own understanding. The collapse of traditional society released the individual from the chains of traditional authority and gave us the freedom to follow our own reason. This narrative still underpins much of our contemporary thinking about the democratic public realm and, by implication, the role of experts in it. When we examine the contemporary crisis of expertise with this narrative in mind, the problem confronting us appears indeed as a failure of public reason. From this perspective, the theoretical issue seems like a matter of rational adjudication: how to distinguish reasonable and legitimate claims from unreasonable and illegitimate ones? In response to this problem, the instrumental and the procedural approach offer two different conceptions of public reason as the source of universal legitimacy.

In contrast, the Arendtian perspective suggests that there is no universal basis for political legitimacy. From Arendt’s existentialist perspective, the notion that public discourse ought to be governed by universal norms of reason appears less as a reasonable requirement and more as an attempt to escape the abyss of uncertainty and responsibility that inheres in human freedom. In the preface to Men in Dark Times, Arendt writes that her notion of “dark times” is essentially the same as the phenomenon that Jean-Paul Sartre describes as “bad faith” (MDT: p: viii). To act in bad faith, Sartre argues, essentially involves a denial of freedom: it is a way of surrendering oneself to the forces of the surrounding world. In a famous passage, Sartre illustrates this phenomenon with an example of a waiter at a café:
His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patron with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. [...] All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café (Sartre 1943/1969: p. 59, emphasis in original).

“Dark times” is Arendt’s name for the sociohistorical circumstances that condition us to act in such bad faith. These are the circumstances under which people become unable or unwilling to resist the forces of their surroundings, and therefore begin to adopt values, beliefs, goals, and manners that are not authentically their own. In dark times, human beings are tempted to turn themselves into objects – to become like Sartre’s waiter or Arendt’s Eichmann. In other words, Arendt’s concern is not with adjudication but with affirmation. In her view, the fundamental issue is not how to rationally adjudicate between competing claims, but rather, how to confront reality on its own terms and affirm one’s freedom to respond to it. The problem she addresses is not epistemic but existential: the question is not how to correctly distinguish right from wrong, but how to endure the very task of having to make such distinctions.

The story Arendt tells us about modernity differs from the conventional Enlightenment narrative. Modernity has indeed liberated the individual from the shackles of the past. However, liberation is not the same as freedom, and the modern age has not delivered on its promise of emancipation. Rather, the modern age confronts us with a specifically modern predicament: how to endure the abyss of arbitrariness that inheres in every new beginning (see LMW: p. 207). When the old tyrants are overthrown, human beings find themselves in the gap between past and future. This gap can be understood as an elevated presence: the continuity with the past is broken, and the future therefore presents itself as an “abyss”. In this situation, the human ability to bear the burden of freedom – to “feel pleased” with it – is at risk of being exhausted. When this occurs, the public realm loses its power to illuminate human affairs and turns instead into a place of obscurity:

[D]arkness has come when [the light of the public] is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government”, by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality (MDT: p. viii).
This narrative about modernity, which characterizes the modern world as suffering a loss of meaning, echoes the work of other existentialist thinkers like Nietzsche, Kirkegaard, Heidegger, and Jaspers. Arendt’s political outlook is existentialist in that it emphasizes the inalienable responsibility of human beings to make their own distinctions: to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, reality from illusion. There are no higher authorities to appeal to, and no methods or procedures that allow us to close the abyss. When this perspective is applied to the contemporary crisis of expertise, we can see that citizens ultimately cannot rid themselves of the burden that comes with their new role as experts on experts. There is no universal method or procedure that they can seize to dissolve the uncertainty and put the political struggle over knowledge to rest. The responsibility to judge now falls on them, as citizens and spectators. In their role as experts on experts, citizens must make up their own minds and carefully choose their company.

Here, some might want to object and say that there must at least be some methods or procedures that are better than others for deciding which experts to listen to, and which could therefore guide us in our attempts to distinguish reliable and legitimate knowledge claims from manipulative ones. For example, in seeking advice on how to respond to the spread of a new viral disease, it must surely be better to consult the views of an epidemiologist or a public health expert, who has accredited knowledge and prior experience in a relevant field of research, instead of seeking guidance from a dentist, a dermatologist, or, even worse, a homeopath. However, this objection misses the point completely. As Zerilli (2011) points out, Arendt’s aim was never to dispel truths or rational arguments from the realm of political discussion, “but to press us to think about what we are doing when we reduce the practice of politics or judgment to the contest of better arguments” (p. 122). When we reduce public discourse to a contest of better arguments, I suggest, we distract from the existential dimension involved in democratic opinion-formation. It is precisely this dimension that Arendt tries to bring into view when she insists that, in matters of judgment, we are free to resist even the force of arguments and to choose whatever company we prefer.

The existential problem that Arendt draws our attention to is that freedom can be denied: the possibility that we may find ourselves unable or unwilling to actively affirm it. Thus, the issue is not just that citizens could be manipulated or misled by pseudoscience and propaganda; rather, the fundamental issue is that they could resign from actively judging at all. This suggests that the contemporary predicament is demonstrated not only in the outright denial of scientific facts like anthropogenic climate change. It is equally manifest in our apparent inability to extract meaning from such knowledge and respond accordingly. Like Sartre’s waiter, we may play at being conscious citizens, ready to publicly profess our trust in science. However, our relationship to knowledge will remain superficial unless we actively process it in our imagi-
nation. From an existentialist viewpoint, the prevalence of superficial and in-authentic allegiance to scientific facts indicates that the real problem lies not in the denial of truth but in the denial of freedom. When human beings are unable or unwilling to affirm freedom, we lose the conditions under which science and academic knowledge can contribute to our sense of reality. Scientific facts can be experienced as meaningful and real only if we assume the burden of actively taking them into account, accepting the responsibility of having to judge for ourselves. Therefore, the issue is not how to bridge the abyss of freedom but how to endure it.

However, Arendt is not a typical existentialist but a political one. Her suggestion is not that modern individuals must now rise to the task and assume the burden of judgment as sovereign, self-sufficient beings. The good judge, in her view, is not a hero but someone who knows how to choose their company. Only gods, not human beings, can create meaning on their own; and neither the reality of the world nor the authenticity of the self can be restored simply by propagating an ethos of truthfulness. The modern predicament, as Arendt sees it, lies in our estrangement from the common world. A constructive approach must therefore focus on redeeming this relationship. What is needed, therefore, is not a new ethos emphasizing individual virtue or strength, but a conception of the practice through which we can construct the worldly, public spaces that ground our ability to experience our freedom as meaningful and tolerable. Like action, judgment requires a public space where it can come into play. Such public spaces do not exist naturally – they are human achievements. Thus, in the final chapter, I will elaborate on how experts can participate in constructing such meaningful public spaces by assuming a role as world-builders.
In times of uncertainty, democratic societies turn to experts for guidance. When a new viral disease starts to spread, a war breaks out, when financial institutions go bankrupt, or when cities are afflicted by natural disasters, it is often the scientists and academics – not the politicians – that end up in the center stage of the public realm. In this dissertation, I have examined the role of experts in democracy against the background of the contemporary crisis of expertise. My assumption has been that experts play a democratic role in the public realm that goes beyond their role as public educators and advisors. Put differently, I have assumed that democracies need experts not only for the sake of rational decision-making but also to support the democratic character of public opinion-formation. The present crisis therefore highlights a democratic problem of the first order: how to support democratic opinion-formation, given the vulnerabilities of the public realm?

In addressing this research problem, I have examined the two currently predominant normative approaches to expertise within democracy and taken the first steps toward developing a new approach that responds to their limitations. In the critical part of the dissertation (Chapter 2), I conducted the literature review on public reason, distinguished the two main normative perspectives, and extracted their implications for expertise. I then subjected the two approaches – the instrumental and the procedural – to critical examination. The instrumental and procedural approaches provide important insights into the normative relationship between politics and knowledge within the democratic public realm. However, I have argued that they also suffer from serious limitations. What is still missing, I found, is an approach that specifically addresses the more existential dimension of this relation: an approach that corresponds not only with the need for democratic societies to know but also with their need to make sense of what they know. Such an approach should theorize how experts can support citizens’ ability to relate in meaningful ways to science and academic knowledge.

In the conceptual part of the thesis (Chapters 3 and 4), I turned to Hannah Arendt to develop a new approach. Arendt never discussed the role of experts in democracy, nor did she systematically address the concept of democracy. Nonetheless, I have argued that her political thought proves a valuable source
both for rethinking the democratic problem reflected in the contemporary crisis, and for constructing a new approach to expertise that responds to this predicament. Through Arendt’s lens, we can see what it means to approach the crisis as symptomatic of modern world alienation.

In this final chapter, I will put the new approach together and put it in perspective by comparing it with the approaches discussed in Chapter 2. As we have seen, the instrumental and the procedural approaches emerge from the literature on public reason, a debate that pivots on the question of how to claim universal legitimacy for moral and political beliefs. In contrast, the approach that I develop is inspired by Arendt’s more existentialist notion of judgment as the practice by which human beings affirm their freedom. In a nutshell, this approach posits that democracy needs experts to support the conditions under which human beings can experience the freedom to begin anew as tolerable and meaningful. By making sense of knowledge that is remote to common understanding, experts contribute to the construction of public contexts that ground our ability to engage imaginatively with the common world. Such imaginative sense-making, I will argue, enables human beings to reconcile themselves with the common world, so that they can take it as their point of departure when inserting themselves into the future. In what follows, I will use the conceptual building blocks from Chapter 4 to put the existential approach together. I will then extract its normative implications for (1) the basis of expert authority; (2) the diagnosis of the crisis; and (3) the role of experts in democracy, and discuss them in comparison with those of the instrumental and procedural approach. I will also revisit and answer my research questions and discuss the general contribution of the thesis to democratic theory and to the literature on Arendt’s scholarship. Finally, I will address three possible objections against the existential approach, discuss its political significance, and point to some areas for future research.

The Existential Approach

The new approach is termed ‘existential’ because it corresponds with the existential conditions for democracy. It proceeds from the assumption that democracy can prevail only if citizens remain willing and able to affirm their freedom by actively making up their own judgments about common issues. In other words, democracy can acquire meaning only if citizens are willing and able to assume the burden of judgment that accompanies their democratic citizenship. In Chapter 4, I examined three Arendtian concepts to see how they could assist us in developing a new conceptual understanding of expert authority and its relation to public judgment. Thus, to explain what I mean by ‘the existential approach,’ let me begin by summarizing what I have taken from Arendt’s work on these three concepts.

First, what I have taken from Arendt’s work on authority is the notion of authority relations as a stabilizing element that is consistent with freedom.
According to Arendt, authority involves hierarchy but no coercion: it is not a “right to rule” but an elevated position from which to speak and pass judgment. Authority cannot be claimed by force; it can only be given voluntarily from below (see BPF: pp. 91-141). To have authority, thus, is not to be entitled to give commands, or to have the power to set one’s subjects into motion. Rather, those with authority have the privilege of speaking from an elevated position – a position from which to affirm, advise, and account for the events and conditions of the world. Arendt’s concept of authority, I have suggested, is particularly relevant for understanding the position of experts in the contemporary public realm. The experts are not rulers. They are not the primary source of political power in our society, and they have no means of coercion at their disposal. They cannot force their views upon the public, or make people act on their advice. Nevertheless, they do occupy a privileged position in the public realm. The experts are publicly recognized as ‘experts’ by virtue of their academic credentials. They have accredited knowledge of a kind that is not widely distributed among the general population. In public conversations about common issues, the expert view carries more weight than the opinion of any layperson. In essence, experts have an authoritative standing in the public realm – a position that allows them to serve as a stabilizing element in democratic politics.

Secondly, what I have taken from Arendt’s work on the public is her notion of the public realm as a “table” that gathers us together while keeping us separated (HC: p. 52). From an Arendtian perspective, public discourse is not a procedure that tends toward a binding conclusion. Instead, the Arendtian public is best understood as the shared space – the context – where human beings can maintain their relationship with the common world. The point of public speech, in her view, is not to search for universally acceptable justifications or to attain a consensus of some sort. Rather, the point is to search continuously for the type of understanding that redeems us to the common world and allows the relationship to keep going. This conception of the public realm informs my understanding of the democratic context in which the experts operate. The democratic practice that the experts help support is not a procedure of reasoning that aims toward agreement with universally acceptable conclusions. According to the existential approach, their contribution to democratic life is better understood in spatial terms: what they do is construct public spaces or contexts for keeping in touch with the common world. Thus, this approach does not define the vocation of experts in relation to democracy’s need for a procedure to resolve disagreement. Instead, it defines it in relation to democracy’s need for the type of contexts that allow citizens to keep gathering around the issues they have in common, even when they are inescapably divided in their opinions about them.

Thirdly, what I have taken from Arendt’s work on judgment is the notion of judging as the practice through which human beings affirm their freedom. According to Arendt, judging is the imaginative enterprise where we remove
ourselves from our own subjective view of the world, for the sake of sharing it with our fellow human beings. By training our minds to “go visiting” perspectives and situations that are remote from our own position, we can broaden our view of the world and acquire a position of “enlarged mentality” (LKPP: p. 43). When we imagine what the world looks like from perspectives other than our own, we acquire a position from which we can form judgments – that is, judgments that have greater generality than the prejudices (pre-judgments) that are attached to our own, personal standpoint. Our judgments will have greater generality the more perspectives we have been able to consider in the process of forming it, and the better we have been able to represent them. However, for Arendt – or that is how I interpret her – judging is not only, or even primarily, about the practice by which we can claim validity for our opinions. Judging is also, and perhaps more importantly, the practice by which we reconcile ourselves to the common world and affirm our freedom to begin it anew. It is this practice that enables us to acquire the type of understanding that Patchen Markell (2006) describes as ‘attunement’ to reality. According to Arendt, this type of understanding is acquired through narratives. Thus, in forming a judgment, we must not only assess the available facts and arguments but also put together a story that makes sense of what we know or experience. By putting stories into shape, the arbitrary contingencies of human existence can acquire coherence and meaning, and we gain the sense of catharsis that allows us to overcome the feelings that prevent us from beginning anew (BPF: p. 257). Stories have the power to attune us to the facticity of the world – to foster acceptance of that which we cannot change at will and to situate us within the realm of possibilities. As such, they support our ability to take reality as our point of departure when we act into the future. It is narratives, not arguments, that help us bear the burden of judgment.

This last point needs some further elaboration. In her work on the concept of judgment, Arendt introduces an important distinction between knowledge and understanding. Understanding, she asserts, is based on knowledge but transcends it – to understand is to “make knowledge meaningful” (EU: p. 311). This means that we can know things that we are nevertheless unable to understand. Arendt’s distinction between knowing and understanding relates to my critique in Chapter 2 of the two currently predominant approaches to expertise. These approaches operate under the assumption that expertise is a source of public knowledge. However, they both fail to consider the role of expertise in supporting public understanding. For example, in my critique of the procedural approach, I used the example of climate change indifference to illustrate my point. To understand a scientific issue such as climate change is not the same as being informed about scientific facts and findings. Nor is it the same as having considered the relevant arguments for and against climate action. Understanding also involves recognizing such facts and arguments as referring to something real – that is, to be able to acknowledge claims about climate change not just as true or valid on a cognitive level, but also to experience
them as referring to something concrete, an aspect of reality. Moreover, understanding involves identification. This means that it is insufficient to perceive a common issue as ‘important’ or ‘urgent’ in an objective sense – we must also be able to identify with it, to experience it as a matter of our concern. Thus, what is missing is not always facts and arguments. As I observed in Chapter 2, one can be well-informed about climate change, and well-versed in the debate about climate policy, and yet unable to relate in a meaningful sense to this piece of knowledge. For example, we may experience climate change as somehow vague and distant, a hypothetical problem more than a crisis that demands our attention here and now.

To go beyond the limits of the existing normative approaches, therefore, we must consider the role that experts can play in supporting public understanding. This is the impetus behind the existential approach: it is based on the idea that democratic opinion-formation must not only involve reasoning based on knowledge, but it must also involve the type of sense-making that allows us to extract meaning from what we know. To this end, we must resort to the type of discourse that has the power to reconcile us with reality. Thus, expert authority responds to our innate need to reconcile ourselves with a reality that is constantly changing and difficult to grasp. According to the existential approach, democracy needs experts not only to deliver or construct public knowledge but also to make sense of it.

When experts participate in public discussions about issues of common concern, they do not just provide the public realm with facts and arguments. They also construct ‘expert accounts’ – scientifically informed “stories” that aim to make sense of what we know about the issue under consideration. A story, in Arendt’s sense, must be broadly understood. What Arendt refers to is the story as “a series of events, not a text” (Cavarero 2000: p. 28). For Arendt, storytelling is a mode of discourse that not only includes literature and fiction but “everything from the causal anecdotes told by friends over dinner or by parents to children […], to the narratives and essays she herself wrote for The New Yorker and Commentary” (Disch 1993: p. 668).

Arendt’s emphasis on storytelling, I suggest, is not primarily a celebration of narratives as a vehicle for critical thinking (Disch 1993) or even as a way of life (Kristeva 2001). More fundamentally, and as argued by Leslie Paul Thiele (2009), Arendt’s interest in stories and storytelling is motivated by her concern with the narrative ontology of action. It is through stories that new beginnings can be made accessible to human understanding. This means, essentially, that storytelling is the mode of discourse that can do justice to action, “the one miracle-working faculty of man” (HC: p. 246). Our ability to affirm a new beginning is contingent upon our ability to turn information and experiences into stories. “Events, like the actions that compose them, are meaningless entries in the ledger of life until they are converted into coherent stories. No amount of conceptual manipulation or quantitative agglomeration can substitute for a narrative accounting” (Thiele 2009: p. 15). To see the meaning of
something – be it a scientific fact or some experience from our daily life – we must fit it into a story or make up a story about it. However, Thiele also rightly cautions that Arendt’s emphasis on stories and storytelling must not be interpreted as a celebration of fiction over fact. “Rather, Arendt is insisting that the facts of political life […] are made available for our understanding and our judgment primarily through their narrative disclosure” (ibid). It is by turning knowledge into stories that human beings can extract meaning from facts and acquire the sense of closure that comes from aligning themselves with reality.

In practice, arguments and narratives typically draw on each other. For instance, examples can be understood as pieces of storytelling that are used to bolster an argument. Correspondingly, art critics may present arguments that help us orient our attention and make us more receptive to the artistic qualities of a painting, film, or novel. However, although different modes of discourse typically mix in practice, I suggest that ‘sense-making’ should be understood as analytically distinct from ‘reason-giving.’ Reason-giving is the practice where we exchange reasons for the sake of arriving at a determined conclusion. Public reason, therefore, is the practice where citizens exchange reasons in search of conclusions that are justifiable, in some sense, to all members of society. Sense-making, in contrast, is the practice where we construct narratives or accounts that appeal to our imagination, for the sake of reconciling ourselves with what we know and experience. This practice does not generate any final answers or conclusions. Rather, it helps us cope with life itself. For example, in our private lives, we put stories together to help ourselves move on from a less-than-perfect childhood, accept our mistakes and failures, or gain a sense of closure when a relationship comes to an end. Stories help us attune to the gains and losses of life. In the public realm, such sense-making is our medium for attuning ourselves to the facts and events of the common world, enabling us to maintain our relationship to it. By stirring our imagination, public narratives support our ability as citizens to redeem ourselves to reality as it is and hence invite us to respond to it. What we get from narratives are not conclusions but the sense of catharsis that prepares us to act. This sense of catharsis allows us to distance ourselves from the immediacy of experience – it releases us from the paralyzing grip of nostalgia, grief, or the frustration or resentment that might push us to react without thinking. What I suggest, in other words, is that it is public sense-making, rather than reason-giving, that supports the ability and willingness of citizens to affirm their freedom to begin the world anew.

Let me illustrate the distinction between reason-giving and sense-making by way of an example. Imagine a trial in a court of justice, where a man (M) stands accused of murder. There is plenty of technical evidence that proves, beyond reasonable doubt, that M is guilty. The prosecution has presented compelling evidence that binds the suspect to the crime scene, to the weapon, and to the body. There is also technical evidence that strongly suggests that the
victim was killed willfully and brutally, not by accident. However, the prosecutor has failed to put a story into shape. There is no satisfying reconstruction of the chain of events that preceded the crime, and no satisfying account of the motive or circumstances that led M to kill his victim. Moreover, M is not a typical criminal: he has no prior criminal record and no criminal connections. People who know him describe him as “ordinary,” to the point of “boring.” In this situation, the judges have been well-served in the sense that they have been given good and sufficient reasons to support their verdict. Nevertheless, these reasons are insufficient to generate understanding. We know that M is guilty, but we cannot understand how or why he ended up in this position. We can conclude, with reasonable certainty, that he is the murderer. Yet, the event as such remains inaccessible to our imagination – we are unable to make sense of it. Although the trial has been successful in the sense that it has enabled the court to declare M guilty and impose punishment, it has failed in the sense that it has not allowed us to come to terms with the event as such. The judges, the family of the victim, and everyone else who has followed the trial are therefore left without the sense of catharsis that comes from putting the story together. The case is brought to a formal conclusion, but our need for understanding is left frustrated: there is no reconciliation.

In this dissertation, my concern is not with legal judgment but with public judgment. The distinction between the public and the legal context is not without importance. The goal of the legal process is to come to terms with past events. The goal of the political process is, ultimately, to decide on a future course of action. However, the distinction between reason-giving and sense-making, I suggest, applies to both realms. The example above illustrates my assertion that the understanding we get from narratives differs from that which we get from arguments. In passing judgments, we need reasons to support our conclusions. Yet, unless we can make sense of what we know or experience, the burden of having to make up our mind will be difficult. Even if we would have irrefutable arguments to back up a decision – which is rarely the case in politics – the inability to put the story together will leave us lacking the acceptance that can only arise through the imaginative processing of information and experience. Thus, when democratic societies are confronted with an issue that calls for their judgment – a pandemic, a war, a rapidly emerging climate crisis – arguments, no matter how compelling, are not a substitute for well-crafted narratives. To the extent that experts play a role in supporting public understanding, it is insufficient for them to convey scientific information and present arguments for a specific course of action. What democratic societies need are not only arguments that speak to our faculty of reason, but also stories or scientifically informed accounts that activate our imagination. It is by engaging imaginatively with what we know about the common issue – the pandemic, the war, or the emerging climate crisis – that we become able to reconcile ourselves with it and gain a sense of reality and identification that cannot be acquired through reasoning alone.
When experts draw on their knowledge and experience to account for common issues, they engage in the type of sense-making that supports public understanding. This practice is not itself governed by scientific methods or rules of argumentation. Rather, it trades in the very ordinary form of imaginative thought that we all engage in our day-to-day lives. As Arendt asserts, “[e]verybody who tells a story of what happened to him half an hour ago on the street has got to put this story into shape” (TWB: p. 444). It is our faculty of imagination – not our education or intelligence – that enables us to make sense of what we know and experience. We have no reason to assume that experts are better storytellers compared to the average person. However, experts are acquainted with fields of research that people in general know little about. They are experienced in the subject matter, and they have had more time to reflect on and discuss them with their peers. Consequently, they are generally in a better position than most people to put a meaningful account together when their field of academic interest suddenly happens to become relevant for a matter of common concern.

Unlike reason-giving, the point of sense-making is not to attain a determined conclusion but to provide a sense of closure while stirring further engagement. The meaning that we get from narratives (including expert accounts) is naturally more ambiguous than the conclusions drawn from arguments. Nonetheless, as Lisa Disch (1993) points out, this ambiguity is one of the advantages of storytelling. Stories have the capacity to create meaning while retaining openness (p. 688). Ambiguity and indeterminacy always detract from the force of an argument, a testimony, or an example, as these modes of discourse are all oriented toward arriving at a determined conclusion. However, this is not the case with storytelling (ibid). Ambiguity in a story only means that the “conclusion” – that is, its meaning – is left open to interpretation and re-interpretation. Politically, this is an advantage in the sense that stories have the power to create coherence while stirring imagination, and to foster acceptance while inviting contestation from other points of view. Narratives have the power to create order out of contingencies, and to bring closure while encouraging the continued engagement that is needed to keep our relationship to the common world alive.

The goal of expert sense-making is not to create consensus through a single authoritative narrative. Rather, the goal is to construct accounts that contribute to the public quest for understanding, a quest that is endless in principle. For example, as non-expert citizens, we depend on climate scientists to translate research findings into public accounts that are accessible to our imagination, simply because we lack the familiarity that is needed to make sense of such specialized knowledge. However, climate scientists do not “own” the story about climate change, nor should they attempt to monopolize public understanding of this common issue. If their attempts to make sense of climate change would spark further engagement with the issue and inspire new stories to be told from different (academic or non-academic) perspectives, this should
rather be taken as a sign of success. According to the existential approach, the elevated position of experts in the public realm – their authority – does not compete with the freedom and responsibility of citizens to use their own judgment. On the contrary, by using their position to make sense of knowledge that is remote to common understanding, experts can provide citizens with meaningful and coherent stories to contemplate and challenge. As such, expert sense-making provides points of reference that contribute to the order that human beings need to endure the burden of judging for themselves.

The Crisis Reconsidered
In Chapter 1, I reviewed the sociological literature on knowledge society and described the modern transformation of the social relationship between knowledge and politics that has resulted through this development. Since the mid-20th century, the world has seen a tremendous increase in scientific knowledge. Not only has scientific research become more sophisticated in terms of its methods, but its results have also expanded to new areas; moreover, scientific information is now accessible to competing actors across the political spectrum. In modern knowledge society, science has become more advanced, more accessible, and more important as a source of political legitimacy. However, as observed by the sociologists of science, this development means not only that we now have access to more and better knowledge than ever before – but it has also radically changed the societal relationship between knowledge and politics (see, e.g., Weingart 1999; 2001; Limoges 1993; Stehr 2001; Stehr & Grundmann 2011; Eyal 2019). In modern knowledge society, politicians must navigate public expectations that policies should be grounded in scientific evidence. The authority of science has become a significant factor in the political competition for power. The experts, on their part, are now confronted with demands for accountability and representation. This modern transformation lies at the core of several longstanding debates in the social sciences concerning the expertization of politics, their politicization of knowledge, and their implications for both science and democracy. What I have emphasized, however, is an aspect of the modern transformation that has received less scholarly attention: the change that it has brought to the role of citizens. In the contemporary public realm, science and academic knowledge are at once our primary sources of guidance for navigating uncertainty and an object of political contestation. The implication is that citizens can no longer safely fall back on the authority of experts but are now under pressure to become experts themselves, “experts on experts.”

As I also asserted in Chapter 1, the crisis of expertise is not just a crisis for knowledge but also a crisis for democracy. What is at stake is not only rational decision-making but also the democratic process of opinion-formation. The vulnerability of the public realm is not only a problem for individual liberty
but also for democracy – because democratic decisions do not draw their legitimacy straight from the ballot but from the process of opinion-formation in the public realm. The instrumental and the procedural approaches provide two different conceptions of the meaning of democratic opinion-formation, and two different interpretations of the democratic problem reflected in the crisis of expertise. However, they share the notion that the crisis reflects a failure of public reason: a failure of the contemporary public realm to approximate the Kantian ideal of universal legitimacy. According to this interpretation, the crisis manifests a loss of legitimacy that occurs when the public realm fails to realize a public process of reason-giving that binds the democratic process to reasons that are acceptable, in some sense, to all members of society.

In this dissertation, I have sought to develop an alternative interpretation of the crisis and the democratic problem it reflects. The interpretation I have advanced, drawing on Arendt’s concept of world alienation, suggests that the crisis reflects the inability of democratic societies to cope constructively with the added burden of judgment in modern knowledge society. When we examine the crisis from an Arendtian perspective, it no longer appears to highlight a problem of public reason, i.e., the failure of the public realm to properly assist citizens in their attempts to adjudicate between reasonable and unreasonable claims. Rather, the crisis now appears to reflect the failure of the public realm to provide citizens with meaningful contexts that can assist them in their attempts to make sense of scientific facts and arguments.

Scientific knowledge abounds in the contemporary public realm, but knowledge as such does not automatically empower or give meaning. In fact, the very task of having to make sense of knowledge by reflecting on it – of having to take it into account before arriving at a standpoint or decision – can also be experienced as overwhelming. When our capacity for reflection is exhausted or overwhelmed, we resign to what Arendt calls ‘thoughtlessness’ (see LMT: pp. 191-193). Thoughtlessness, I have suggested, can manifest in different ways. Sometimes, our inability to think can turn us apathetic or numb, even toward information that we acknowledge as true and important in principle. Other times, it can manifest as a kind of hyper-reactiveness – a tendency to react on every impulse, to be moved into action by mere provocations, or to be consumed by meaningless distractions. In either case, thoughtlessness denotes a failure to “stop-and-think” (p. 78). In a state of thoughtlessness, we become swayed by the forces of necessity, whether these reveal themselves as the passive acceptance of routinized behavior or as the fanatic reactivity of agitation.

When our capacity for imaginative thought becomes overburdened, it is difficult to feel “pleased” with freedom (see LMW: p. 217). Without meaningful contexts for keeping in touch with the common world, our freedom to start anew is turned into a superhuman responsibility. Thus, according to the interpretation that I propose, inspired by Arendt’s critique of the modern condition, the contemporary crisis does not reflect the loss or distortion of public reason.
Instead, it reflects the resignation that accompanies the loss of a meaningful relationship: an alienation from knowledge. In this view, the fundamental problem lies in the possibility that citizens could lose their appetite for freedom and hence resign from their role as “experts on experts.” This resignation from the burdens of modern citizenship might express itself as surrendering to the rule of some authoritative figure (or technological device) that promises to carry the burden in our stead. Alternatively, it might express itself as numbness, or as a childlike attitude of defiance against all expert claims, which we adopt to protect ourselves from the responsibility of having to actively consider them. In either scenario, the existential interpretation of the crisis holds that the inability to reflect on the meaning of knowledge – to actively relate to it – ultimately comes down to a denial of freedom: an inability or unwillingness to affirm freedom by paying the price for our democratic membership in a common world.

Three Approaches to Expertise

The three approaches provide different answers to three questions: (1) how to understand the normative basis for expert authority, (2) how to diagnose the democratic problem reflected in the crisis of expertise, and (3) how to understand the role of experts within democracy. As we have seen, both the instrumental and procedural approaches view expert authority as corresponding with the epistemic or rational conditions for democracy. According to the instrumental approach, the normative basis for expert authority consists of the ability of experts to deliver objective knowledge to the public realm. Consequently, the contemporary crisis reflects the de-legitimization of public opinion that occurs when knowledge is politicized. According to the procedural approach, in contrast, experts do not have authority in and by themselves. Rather, it is by bringing scientific perspectives into rational dialogue with the situated knowledge and lived experiences of citizens that experts can contribute to the construction of authoritative knowledge in the public realm. From this standpoint, the contemporary crisis reflects the de-legitimization of public opinion that occurs when knowledge is used strategically, as a tool for domination.

The existential approach differs from both the instrumental and procedural approaches in the sense that it corresponds with the existential – not the epistemic or rational – conditions for democracy. According to this approach, the normative basis for expert authority lies in the ability of scientific experts to make sense of knowledge – that is, their ability to make knowledge that is remote to common understanding accessible to our imagination. It is only by processing knowledge in our imagination that we can understand it and acquire the sense of attunement that allows us to begin anew. As we saw in the previous section, the contemporary crisis of expertise reflects the failure of the public realm to assist us in doing so: what it reflects is the failure to maintain
a meaningful relationship to science and academic knowledge. The existential approach, therefore, diagnoses the crisis as the manifestation of a vicious cycle of alienation and resignation, which de-legitimizes public opinion by making it meaningless.

Each of the three approaches also generates its own normative conception of the role of experts in the democratic public realm. According to the instrumental approach, experts should serve as gatekeepers, and guard the boundary between knowledge and politics which is needed to sustain the legitimacy of both realms. According to the procedural approach, experts play an important role as facilitators, enabling and enhancing the rational and reciprocal interaction that brings legitimacy to both public decisions and public knowledge. The existential approach provides a third conception. According to this approach, experts have an important role in democracy as world-builders, building public contexts for making sense of knowledge. The goal of such sense-making is not to foster agreement with conclusions. Rather, expert world-building generates a legitimacy of a different kind. By making sense of scientific knowledge, experts contribute to the conditions that support our ability to attune to the world. Expert sense-making supports our ability to take reality as it is, but it does not necessarily generate agreement on conclusions. What it legitimizes is not a conclusion or decision, but the common world itself.

When experts use their knowledge to account for common issues, they operate as a world-building power in the public realm. This means that they create and cultivate the public contexts that ground our political capacity to push back against the alienated condition that Arendt describes, somewhat suggestively, as “the loss of the world.” Thus, the existential approach theorizes the democratic role of experts in spatial terms. While both the instrumental and procedural approaches define the role of experts in relation to democracy’s need for a public process of reasoning, the existential approach defines it in relation to democracy’s need for meaningful public contexts. As world-builders, experts contribute to constructing such contexts – shared spaces of meaning – and by doing so, they support the ability of citizens to resist thoughtlessness and maintain their connection to the common world.

What normative guidance can we get from the existential approach, and how does it compare with that which we get from the other two approaches? Let me take an example to illustrate the normative implications of the three conceptions: how to respond to climate change denial. In response to this issue, the three approaches generate different recommendations.

According to the instrumental approach, the example of climate change denial illustrates the need for a principled distinction between knowledge and politics. In politics, we are free to disagree, but we are not free to deny that which we know for a fact. In public discussions about climate change, the instrumental approach therefore suggests that experts play an important role in informing the public about scientific facts and debunking misinformation. In their vocation as public gatekeepers, experts must take great care to sort out
the distinction between that which we know beyond reasonable doubt, theories and estimates that are uncertain but likely to be true, and mere speculations that have no support in the academic literature. This strategy relies on the assumption that resistance to climate science demonstrates public ignorance.

According to the procedural approach, however, the example of climate change denial illustrates the failure of the modern public realm to realize a rational process of communication that brings together both expert and non-expert perspectives on the issue. From this viewpoint, climate change denial is not necessarily rooted in public ignorance but could also reflect a reasonable mistrust. For example, public mistrust toward climate science could reflect a suspicion that those who advocate a radical green transition are either unaware or indifferent to how this transition would affect the lives of people in the countryside, or of people employed in the industrial sector. Thus, according to the procedural approach, public resistance to climate change illustrates the need for new forms and forums for public communication about science. The goal should be an inclusive process of communication that can succeed in both raising public awareness about science and making the scientific community more aware of the cares and concerns of non-expert citizens, including their reasons for doubting the reality of climate change. This recommendation is based on the assumption that people are more likely to accept conclusions that follow from a process in which they have been included.

According to the existential approach, climate change denial illustrates the experience of living in separate worlds. In this perspective, the main problem is not merely that public opinion remains divided on a pressing issue but that the public realm fails to provide a context where the world can reveal itself from various angles. When we lose the ability to entertain other points of view, removed from our own, we lose our very sense of reality. When we cannot imagine what the world looks and feels like from other viewpoints than our own, our sense of reality becomes confined by our own perspective on the world. Everything that cannot be fitted into our own worldview must, therefore, be denied. Thus, according to the existential approach, what the example of climate change denial illustrates is not the need for more or better information or even rational dialogue, primarily, but the need for the type of imaginative sense-making that helps us get the common world into proper view. Such sense-making does not generate agreement on conclusions. However, it does have the power to redeem our sense of sharing a common world.

One example of the world-building power of expert sense-making can be found in Arlie Hochschild’s book *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016). In this book, Hochschild tries to make sense of the Red/Blue divide in American politics, and her focus is exactly on the environmental issue. She describes the puzzle as “The Great Paradox.” How should we understand the fact that people in Red (Republican) states, who are in most need of government support, are nevertheless so strongly opposed to federal regulation and welfare programs? For example, how should we understand the fact that those who are
most exposed to the effects of toxic pollution, and who have been most afflicted by environmental damage in the past, are also more likely to believe that Americans “worry too much about the environment” and to state that their country is doing “more than enough” about it (p. 64)? Put bluntly, from the perspective of a “Blue” American, the political sentiments of the right may seem irrational, at odds with their very own interests. In her effort to make sense of this puzzle, Hochschild explores the possibility that the paradox arises precisely out of the blind spots of the Blue worldview, which she shares with most of her social and collegial network. When we study the political views of our opponents from our own standpoint, we can only see what “they” fail to see but remain blind to the limits of our own perspective (pp. 64-66). Thus, to better understand the political sentiments of the American right, Hochschild removes herself from her own Blue bubble in Berkeley and moves to Louisiana to immerse herself into the social terrain of the right.

Hochschild’s study pivots on her notion of a “deep story.” She suggests that to understand the perspective of our political opponents, we must try to imagine ourselves in their shoes. In other words, we must not only consider the facts and arguments of the other side but also try to imagine what life feels like to people from the other side of the divide. A deep story, in Hochschild’s sense, is not about facts and arguments, “it’s the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols” (p. 101). By reconstructing the deep story of our political opponents, we can make sense of political sentiments that might otherwise appear strictly irrational. The point of such storytelling is not to abandon our own political convictions. Rather, it is an exercise that allows us to acquire political understanding, by permitting “those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world” (ibid, emphasis in original). By engaging in this exercise, Hochschild finds that her interviewees are united by a sense of “waiting in line” for the American Dream, and the feeling that other people are “cutting in line” in front of them. In her analysis, thus, the deep story about the American right is a story about the unfulfilled promise of progress, and the feelings of unfairness and resentment it incites.

Hochschild’s deep story is not intended to justify the political views of her interviewees. Rather, it aims to make sense of the fact that they turn their anger and disappointment toward minorities, immigrants, and the federal government, and not toward the oil companies and local governments that are responsible for the exploitation and pollution of their local environment. According to Hochschild, the power of the deep story is that it helps us cross the “empathy wall” that runs in parallel with political divisions and divides us into separate worlds. This wall, she asserts, “is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhoods are rooted in different circumstances” (p. 15). By visiting the perspectives of our political opponents – not
only by listening to their arguments but by imagining ourselves into their subjective experience of the world – we become better equipped to work toward a more understanding, empathetic, and humane political culture.

From an Arendtian perspective, however, the type of sense-making that Hochschild recommends is not about empathy. The point is not to feel with the other person but to acquire a more realistic view of the world that we share. The understanding we get from stories is not the same as the agreement on conclusions that we can attain through reasoning – but neither is it the same as empathy or forgiveness. According to Arendt, the act of judging involves visiting perspectives that are not our own, by making people and things that are physically absent present to our minds – that is, by re-presenting them to our imagination (BPF: p. 237). As Arendt explains, representative thinking “is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not” (ibid). We can represent the perspective of our opponents – even that of our enemies – without agreeing with or even empathizing with them. To engage imaginatively with a viewpoint is not the same as agreeing with it, nor is it the same as making excuses for those who hold it. Rather, Arendt argues that the understanding we gain from such exercises in imagination precedes both forgiveness and condemnation: it is the understanding that makes us privileged to judge. “The political function of the storyteller”, she writes, “is to teach acceptance of things as they are” (p. 258). However, this acceptance is not the same as accepting the views of our opponents as correct or even legitimate. The acceptance that we acquire is that which redeems us to the common world.

Recall the earlier example of the trial, where we know beyond reasonable doubt that the accused (M) is guilty, but fail to understand the nature of his crime. When a crime defies our imagination – for example, when we cannot understand the motive of the perpetrator – we are tempted to expel it from the realm of what is humanly imaginable. For example, we may say that the crime is “monstrous” or that the person responsible for it is “sub-human.” However, from an Arendtian perspective, such statements are not judgments, properly speaking. Instead, they are clichés that betray the limits of our own understanding. We know for a fact that M is human, not a monster. Yet, we cannot stand to identify with him as a fellow human being. We cannot reconcile ourselves to the fact that his deeds are within the scope of what is humanly possible, and we therefore use clichés to protect ourselves from having to deal with him – from having to “keep his company,” even imaginatively speaking.

Certainly, there are limits to human comprehension. Some deeds and experiences are quite impossible for us to understand. When we are confronted with an event or phenomenon that extends the limits of what we could possibly understand, we may cope by denying those specific aspects of reality. Hence, we can go on only by excluding this part of reality from the stories we settle for, and by using clichés to cover up the gaps. Meaningless speech protects us
from having to deal with unpleasant people, facts, feelings, or events, and from having to identify and acquaint ourselves with that which is unfamiliar, strange, or uncomfortable. It can protect us from having to share the world with murderers, or with people who hold opinions that we find repulsive. However, this way of protecting ourselves comes at a price. When we expel the unpleasant and unfamiliar from the realm of our imagination, we inevitably lose sight of a piece of our common world. What is sacrificed is our very sense of reality, and hence our ability to properly judge it.

In this section, I have compared the existential approach to the two approaches examined in Chapter 2 and discussed their normative implications. The existential approach generates a new normative conception of expertise in democracy: one that emphasizes its world-building capacity. By making sense of knowledge that is remote to common understanding, experts contribute to the construction of a space for public imagination – a context where the common world can properly appear to us, in all its various aspects. In their vocation as world-builders, experts support a public judgment by constructing the type of public contexts where opinions can acquire meaning, and where the very activity of forming them can be experienced as meaningful. The point of expert sense-making is not to realize a process of reasoning that (ideally) leads to agreement on universally acceptable conclusions. Rather, it aims to expand our sense of reality. I call this vocation “world-building” because it serves to redeem our sense of belonging to a common world and to push back against the condition of alienation that Arendt describes as “the loss of the world.” To succeed in this role, it is insufficient for experts to only provide the public realm with scientific facts and arguments. In their public vocation, they must also use their faculty of imagination, and account for common issues by considering what they look like from various points of view.
Table 2. Three Approaches to Expertise

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<td>Delivering knowledge</td>
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<td>Making sense of knowledge</td>
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<td>Diagnosis of the crisis</td>
<td>Politicization of knowledge</td>
<td>Strategic use of knowledge</td>
<td>Alienation from knowledge</td>
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<td>Role for experts</td>
<td>Gatekeepers</td>
<td>Facilitators</td>
<td>World-builders</td>
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In Chapter 2, I observed that the instrumental and the procedural approach not only offer two different conceptions of the expert role but also highlight different ways in which expertise can be turned against its intended purpose. According to the instrumental approach, this occurs when experts themselves contribute to the politicization of science by obscuring the distinction between political views and knowledge that has been scientifically corroborated. According to the procedural approach, the experts betray their democratic vocation when they use knowledge strategically, by using framing or other communication techniques to deliberately push the public conversation in a predetermined direction. The existential approach provides a third perspective on how experts can forsake their democratic role. This occurs when experts themselves are unable or unwilling to confront reality on its own terms: for example, when they try to hide the limits of their own understanding by resorting to clichés, when they deny the novelty of a situation by subsuming it under concepts or categories that no longer apply, or when they indulge in wishful fantasies to protect themselves from having to confront the implications of a harsh reality.

This notion of intellectual corruption governs Arendt’s critique of German intellectuals in the 1930s (see *EU*: pp. 10-11). In her interview with Gaus, she describes her disillusionment with the academic world after Hitler’s takeover in 1933. What she then discovered was that most of her former friends in academia, as opposed to her non-academic friends, agreed to get in line – to “coordinate.” Instead of seeing the political reality for what it was, they began to make up ideas and theories about Hitler. Arendt was appalled by their attempts
to rationalize Nazism, which seemed to her connected with the academic profession as such.\footnote{In her interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt says that she was determined to leave the academic world at the time of her emigration. “I left Germany dominated by the idea – of course a bit exaggerated: Never again! I shall never again get involved in any kind of intellectual business. I want nothing to do with that lot. Also I didn’t believe then that Jews and German Jewish intellectuals would have acted any differently had their own circumstances been different. That was not my opinion. I thought it had to do with this profession, with being an intellectual. […] Today I know more about it. […] But I still think that it belongs to the essence of being an intellectual that one fabricates ideas about everything. No one ever blamed someone who ‘coordinated’ because he had to take care of his wife or child. The worst thing was that some people really believed in Nazism! For a short time, many for a very short time. But that means they made up ideas about Hitler, in part terrifically interesting things! Completely fantastic and interesting and complicated things! Things far beyond the ordinary level! I found that grotesque. Today I would say that they were trapped by their own ideas. That is what happened. But then, at that time, I didn’t see it so clearly” (EU: p. 11).} It is part of the academic profession to make up ideas and theories to make sense of the world. To a certain extent, this habit and talent for sense-making may shield them from the shock of reality. Thus, the existential approach not only provides a new normative conception of expertise in democracy but also offers a new perspective on how expertise can be turned into a disfigurement. From this perspective, expertise is turned against its own purpose when experts become trapped in their own ideas – when they abandon their mission to bring the world closer to public imagination and instead begin to reframe reality to make it fit better with their own intellectual fantasies.

Revisiting the Research Questions

In the introductory chapter, I observed that expertise has commonly been perceived as an apolitical resource in democratic politics. According to what I have described as the conventional view, expertise serves a purely functional role in democratic politics. This view holds that expertise is assumed to be useful to democracy in the same way as plumbing is useful to the functioning of government buildings. Both plumbing and scientific knowledge are tremendously important for the functioning of government buildings, but there is no need to develop normative theories about their proper role (see Turner 2003: p.14). According to this view, there is no need to theorize about the role of experts in democracy because the answer is already given: their role is simply to be ‘on tap, not on top.’

However, the conventional view no longer appears tenable, given the findings and arguments from STS. In response to the growing body of STS research, a new normative debate about expertise is now emerging, which includes scholars from various fields of study. Yet, apart from a few exceptions (Turner 2003; Brown 2009; Moore 2017; Pamuk 2021), the literature on STS and its implications for our normative understanding of the relationship between scientific knowledge and democratic politics have not been systematically explored by democratic theorists. To my knowledge, no one has studied
specifically how Arendt’s work can assist us in this endeavor. This dissertation ameliorates this gap in the literature on democratic theory by responding to the following three research questions:

i. What are the existing normative approaches to expertise in democracy, and why are they insufficient?

ii. How can Arendt’s political thought be of assistance in conceptualizing a new perspective on expertise and its contemporary crisis?

iii. Based on these considerations, how can we construct a new normative approach to expertise in democracy?

In response to the first question, I have reviewed the political theory literature on public reason and extracted its implications for how to understand the normative relationship between expertise and democracy. The literature on public reason yields two distinct normative approaches: one instrumental and one procedural. In my critical examination, I found that both approaches offer important insights into the normative role of expertise in democracy. However, I also argued that they both suffer from serious limitations. They both theorize the role of expertise as corresponding to democracy’s need for knowledge, and they both adopt a Kantian notion of universal legitimacy as their normative standard. Although the instrumental and the procedural approaches operate with two different conceptions of public reason, they share the assumption that the public vocation of experts corresponds to the epistemic or rational conditions for democracy. This assumption, I argued, obscures the more existential dimension of the relationship between democracy and expertise. What the two approaches illuminate is the role of experts in delivering or helping to construct public knowledge. However, they cannot tell us anything about the role of experts in supporting the ability of democratic publics to extract meaning from such knowledge. This gap in our normative understanding of expertise is significant because public knowledge claims (e.g., scientific facts) do not carry their meaning within themselves. They acquire meaning in the context in which they appear, and through our ways of relating to them. Meaning is not the same as truth or correctness. Even knowledge that is widely acknowledged as correct and important in an objective sense can, nevertheless, fail to acquire real meaning. My answer to the first research question, therefore, is that the existing approaches are insufficient, as they fail to consider the role of experts in supporting the ability of democratic publics to relate in meaningful ways to science and academic knowledge.

In response to the second question, I have turned to Arendt’s work to examine how it can assist us in re-interpreting the contemporary crisis of expertise and in constructing a new normative approach that responds to it. My answer to this research question has thus proceeded in two steps. In the first step, I have demonstrated that Arendt’s critique of modernity enables us to see the
present crisis in a new light. By unpacking Arendt’s concept of world alienation and reconstructing the democratic problem that lies at the core of her critique, I have attained an interpretation of the crisis that differs from those guiding the instrumental and the procedural approaches. According to Arendt – or at least how I interpret her – the modern condition is defined by a threefold loss: the loss of stability, the loss of belonging, and the loss of common sense. Taken together, these losses amount to an experience of estrangement from the common world. Arendt’s fundamental insight, I have suggested, is that this modern condition of world alienation puts a strain on our ability to cope constructively with the problem of human existence. Put differently, it puts a strain on our ability to endure the “abyss” that accompanies our human freedom to initiate new beginnings (LMW: pp. 195-217). When human beings lose their will or ability to affirm freedom, they resign to what Arendt calls “thoughtlessness” (see LMT: pp. 191-193). Thoughtlessness is the omnipresent possibility to not think for oneself: the possibility that instead of making up my own mind, I can submit myself to be determined by some necessary force. Such resignation, I suggested, comes in various forms. It includes, but is not restricted to, submitting oneself to the commands of an authoritarian leader. It may also express itself as surrendering to the calculated force of automation, the social force of conforming to society or a group, or the biological force of nature – as when one yields to the pressure of one’s own immediate impulses.

In the second step, I have highlighted how Arendt’s work on three central concepts – authority, the public, and judgment – can be appropriated to construct a new notion of expert authority and how it relates to public judgment. These three Arendtian concepts, thus, help us to construct the conceptual foundation of a new normative approach to expertise. The first building block relates to the idea that experts have authority in the sense that they occupy a privileged position in the public realm – an elevated position that enables them to bring order and stability, not through coercion, but through recognition. The second building block revolves around the idea of the public as the space where human beings can maintain a meaningful relationship with the common world, a relationship that also sustains their very sense of reality. In this view, public discourse is not a process that tends toward the production of universally justifiable conclusions, but a context that has the power to gather citizens together around common issues, even when they are divided in their opinions about them. Finally, the third building block concerns the idea of judging as the activity through which human beings affirm their freedom. According to this conception, judging is not only, or even primarily, the activity by which we can determine whether A is better or more correct than B. More fundamentally, it is the activity where we confront our own freedom and pay the price for it. The true price of our decisions will only appear to us in hindsight, but our judgments will be more realistic if we distance ourselves from our own
perspective on the world, to imagine what it looks like from various points of view.

Consequently, my answer to the second research question is that Arendt can assist us both in rethinking about the democratic problem that we now see reflected in the crisis of expertise and in constructing a new normative approach to address them. Through Arendt’s critique of modern world alienation, we can gain a new perspective on the contemporary crisis. From an Arendtian perspective, the problem is not how to rationally adjudicate between competing knowledge claims in the public realm. Instead, it is about grappling with the task itself – how to endure the added burden of judgment in modern knowledge society. Arendt does not offer a ready-made solution to this predicament. However, her work contains elements that can be used to construct a new normative approach to tackle it. By appropriating three of her concepts, we can construct its conceptual foundation: a new notion of expert authority and how it relates to public judgment. In this framework, experts, qua authorities, operate as a stabilizing factor in democratic politics. When experts use their knowledge to address issues of common concern, they contribute to the construction of a public context where the world can reveal itself as an object of judgment. Such contexts support the ability of citizens to affirm their democratic freedom – not by giving them a method or procedure for attaining universally valid conclusions, but by contributing to conditions in which human beings can experience the burden of having to use one’s own judgment as meaningful and tolerable.

Finally, in response to the third question, I have put the new approach together and discussed its normative implications. According to the existential approach, the normative basis of expert authority lies in their ability to make sense of knowledge that may be remote to public understanding. Experts play an important role in democracy as world-builders, shaping public contexts for making sense of knowledge. In this vocation, experts support the ability of citizens to resist resignation to thoughtlessness and assume the burden of judgment that comes with their membership in a modern democratic knowledge society. This normative conception implies that experts should not only contribute to a public process of reasoning but also engage in public sense-making. They should craft expert accounts that invite non-expert citizens to engage imaginatively with knowledge. By doing so, experts contribute to the construction of a public context where the common world can come into proper view. This world-building enterprise does not automatically or necessarily alleviate political disagreement. They do not generate any solutions or conclusions about what to do. What they provide is a meaningful space where opinions can be formed and exchanged. Thus, expert sense-making does not assist in the realization of a Kantian legitimacy based on universal reason. Instead, it helps create a legitimacy of a different kind: the understanding that reconciles us to the common world. My answer to the third research question is therefore that experts support democratic opinion-formation by constructing
meaningful contexts where it can play out. As such, they contribute to the conditions in which human beings can stand to maintain their relationship with the common world.

Anticipated Objections and Responses

The existential approach provides a new perspective on the normative relationship between expertise and democracy. This approach is not intended as a replacement for the two currently predominant ones. What I suggest is rather that it provides us with complementary normative guidance on how to understand the value, crisis, and role of expertise in modern democracy. The existential approach helps shift our attention from irrationality to meaninglessness, from adjudication to affirmation, and from reason-giving to sense-making. As such, it advances our normative understanding of a democratic problem that the instrumental and procedural approaches have left unaddressed. Nevertheless, the existential approach is not beyond dispute. Let me therefore consider and respond to three anticipated objections.

(1) The existential approach holds that experts should engage in public sense-making. Isn’t this the role of art and culture?

Indeed, experts are not the only ones engaged in public sense-making. It is true that artists, writers, and intellectuals also do so. Expertise, art, and culture, all three, have an important role in constructing a meaningful public context for keeping in touch with the common world. However, experts have a unique position in the modern public realm: they have authority. Experts are publicly recognized as experts by virtue of their academic credentials, which means that they can make sense of the world from an elevated position. The views of an expert carry more weight than the views of non-experts, including those of artists and writers, and expert accounts are authoritative in a way that novels are not. Thus, scientific experts are not the only ones who participate in public sense-making, but they have a unique position in the modern public realm, and hence a unique capacity to bring stability to democratic politics.

(2) The existential approach holds that non-expert citizens not only depend on expertise for information and knowledge but also for meaning. Isn’t this a form of elitism?

The existential approach is “elitist” in the sense that it preserves the hierarchy between experts and non-experts. The public realm is not a seminar room where everyone participates in the discussion on an equal footing, and where only arguments, but not authority, matter. According to the existential ap-
The hierarchy between experts and non-experts is conducive to democracy: we rely on experts to sustain meaningful public conversations about knowledge. Thus, experts should keep this in mind and not let their authority go to waste. They cannot defend their position through force, but they can contribute to the devaluation of their own authority by participating in meaningless debates (for instance, by participating in “word fights” where the participants no longer aim for sense-making but for victory).

However, the existential approach is not elitist in the sense of granting experts the right to enforce their views on the public or excluding citizens from participating in the democratic process of decision-making. Nor is it elitist in the sense that it recommends that experts should operate behind closed doors. On the contrary, experts should engage in public sense-making, and hence contribute to a meaningful public space for democratic opinion-formation. This is the imperative of the existential approach.

(3) The existential approach holds that citizens are free to choose their company – that it is up to each of us to choose who we recognize as an “expert.” Doesn’t this invite politicization?

In modern knowledge society, citizens have been assigned a new role: they must now shoulder the responsibility of having to sort through a great variety of different and often competing knowledge claims. Essentially, they have come under pressure to become “experts on experts.” Thus, in the contemporary public realm, citizens are free to choose whom they trust among these experts. Whether they like it or not, they must now form their own judgments about these experts and their claims. This is not a normative implication of the existential approach but the socio-historical situation that it responds to. According to the interpretation that I advance in the introduction to this dissertation, the added burden of judgment is a consequence of modern transformations. We cannot rid ourselves of this burden because that would require us to roll back a societal transformation that has evolved for more than half a century. In a society where scientific knowledge is at once a significant source of political legitimacy and an abundant resource, expertise is bound to become politically contested. What the existential approach recommends, therefore, is that we must consider the conditions under which human beings can cope more constructively with the burden that now falls on each of us.

Contributions

This dissertation makes several theoretical contributions. First, its primary contribution lies in the development of a new normative approach to expertise, which provides a more existential perspective on the value, crisis, and role of experts in the democratic public realm. The nature of this contribution has
already been discussed throughout this chapter and merits no further consideration. Secondly, by specifically examining the existential underpinnings of democratic discourse, the thesis contributes more generally to our theoretical understanding of democracy. Lastly, the thesis makes a significant contribution to the literature on Arendt’s scholarship by showing how her political thought can be consulted in normative discussions about expertise.

**Contribution to Democratic Theory**

It is widely assumed that democratic institutions can bestow legitimacy on political decisions only if they fulfill certain conditions. According to the instrumental view of political legitimacy, democratic institutions are legitimate by virtue of their capacity to produce valuable outcomes. From this perspective, the legitimizing power of democracy comes from its capacity to deliver beneficial and desirable outcomes, such as economic welfare, justice, and individual freedom (see, e.g., Wall 2007; Arneson 2003). The implication is that the normative basis of democracy would begin to dissolve if the democratic system fails to live up to its promise of favorable outcomes. According to the procedural view on political legitimacy, democracy is legitimate by virtue of its capacity to realize an appropriate procedure for making political decisions. Democratic institutions should therefore be regarded as intrinsically valuable because they embody values such as equal respect (Christiano 2008), collective self-determination (Lafont 2019), or fallibilism, i.e., the opportunity to revise previously made decisions (Urbinati 2014). This view implies that the normative basis of democracy would begin to dissolve if the democratic system fails to live up to its promise to include citizens in a fair, equal, and respectful process of political decision-making.

The existential perspective that I advance in this thesis introduces a complementary notion of democratic legitimacy. This view holds that political legitimacy is not only instrumental and/or procedural – it also has an existential dimension. The democratic process can acquire meaning only if citizens remain willing and capable of forming their own judgments about common issues. If the citizens of a democratic society would surrender their judgment, the democratic process could, in principle, remain adequate in terms of procedural fairness and instrumental efficiency. However, it would become empty and void of meaning. Democratic legitimacy, therefore, corresponds with the conditions under which human beings can experience the burden of having to form one’s own judgments as meaningful and tolerable. The existential view of legitimacy further implies that the normative basis of democracy would begin to dissolve if citizens were no longer willing or able to actively engage in forming their own minds about common issues – for example, if they turn their attention away from the common world and withdraw entirely into their private lives.
Democracy can sustain itself over time only if it provides the conditions under which human beings can experience public opinion-formation as meaningful and worthwhile. This is the normative claim that this thesis brings to the discussion on democratic legitimacy. The theoretical work that I have undertaken also allows me to say something about the mechanism that brings such existential legitimacy to democratic politics. In the existing literature on democratic theory, the emphasis has naturally been on the qualities of the democratic procedure for decision-making. Democracy can be instrumental to the needs and wants of its citizens only if the democratic process is efficient in producing good decisions. Similarly, democracy can acquire procedural legitimacy only if it includes citizens in a fair and respectful process of decision-making. In contrast to these two predominant conceptions of democratic legitimacy, the existential view encourages us to shift our attention from procedure to context. The point is not to deny or diminish the significance of a democratic procedure that allows us to make normatively binding decisions. Procedures are essential – they determine the efficiency, fairness, inclusiveness, and revisability of democratic politics. However, a fair and efficient procedure for decision-making does not automatically sustain the meaningfulness of democratic politics. Our ability to experience politics as meaningful and worthwhile rather depends on our sense of belonging to a shared context. Thus, the existential legitimacy of democracy is not supported by its procedure for political decision-making, but by the context within which such decisions are made.

Many political theorists have stressed that the public realm is essential to democracy, not optional (see, e.g., Urbinati 2014; Kelsen 1945; Dewey 1927; Habermas 1992/1996; 1999a). As Noël O’Sullivan (2009) explains, “the existence of a public realm constitutes a shared relationship between rulers and ruled which makes politics more than mere power or domination” (p. 117). The public realm makes it possible for democratic politics to be something other than a mere manifestation of the force of the majority. It is the source of legitimacy that marks the distinction between politics and domination. What this thesis adds to this argument is that the public realm is essential to democracy not only because it accommodates the public process of reason-giving, which connects democratic decisions with the people over which they purport to have authority, but also because it provides citizens a context to maintain their connection to the common world.

The public realm is the context where the world can reveal itself to us as a meaningful reality. Under normal circumstances, most political issues have little, if any, immediate consequence for us personally. Only on rare occasions do political decisions dramatically interfere with our private lives. Thus, what the existential view alerts us to is democracy’s need for a public context where common issues can acquire meaning and call for our continued care and attention, even when they are of little consequence to us in our private lives. Consequently, the democratic significance of the public realm lies in its power
to gather us together around the things we have in common, establishing a shared space or context where it makes sense to devote one’s time and attention to issues of common concern.

Finally, the thesis also contributes to our normative understanding of a democratic problem that has hitherto received little attention in the contemporary debate on the crisis of democracy. I have argued that Arendt’s primary relevance to democratic theory lies in her original interpretation of the problem of judgment. My interpretation is in this regard indebted to Linda Zerilli (2011; 2016), who posits that Arendt’s work on judgment introduces a “Copernican revolution” in our political thought. The concept of judgment has preoccupied many great thinkers – from Hume to Kant to contemporary theorists such as Rawls and Habermas. These thinkers have all wrestled with the question of how to claim normativity for one’s opinions. The theoretical problem that they have attempted to solve is that of how to rationally adjudicate between competing claims. Consequently, the task for democratic theory appears to be a matter of identifying the right rule or method for dissolving disagreement, or at least containing it within the boundaries of reason. This is also the task that critics such as Habermas accuse Arendt of neglecting when she refuses to articulate a cognitive foundation for politics and, therefore, as he puts it, leaves her readers with “a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion that cannot be closed with arguments” (1977: p. 23). What Zerilli demonstrates is that this objection misses its mark, as it fails to properly grasp the problem that Arendt addresses. Arendt’s concern is not with adjudication but with the prior question of how to get the common world into proper view. “For Arendt, the modern problem of judgment is not one of specifying criteria but of creating and maintaining a political space in which differences in valuation can be publicly expressed and judged” (2016: p. 28). According to Zerilli, Arendt’s work on judgment is “Copernican” in the sense that she turns the table around: her emphasis is not on the public standards that can determine the validity of our judgments and hence contain our political freedom of opinion but on the world-building power of the judging faculty. In other words, the public space is constituted and comes into being through the practice of judging (2011: p. 123). The problem that Arendt addresses is not how to adjudicate between competing views, but how to constitute and maintain a public space where the objects of the world can reveal themselves to us as real and meaningful entities.

In line with Zerilli’s prior work, I have argued that the problem of judgment, as Arendt understands it, embodies the problem of human existence. Accordingly, Arendt’s concern is with judging as the cost of freedom and what it means to pay it, or not. Arendtian freedom is the non-sovereign freedom to begin anew, and the other side of beginning is understanding, i.e., the capacity to reconcile oneself with the facticity of the world. The sober realism that permeates Arendt’s theory of judgment is not grounded in reason or cognition but in the faculty of imagination. From her perspective, our very sense of reality
arises out of our ability to imagine what the world looks and feels like from other positions than our own. To judge politically, in Arendt’s view, means to travel in imagination from one perspective to the next, so that we can acquire a more realistic view of the world and the price that we will have to pay for our actions within it. This activity, she writes, “is one, if not the most, important activity in which [the] sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass” (BPF: p. 218). Thus, for Arendt, judging is not ultimately about containing our differences and disagreements; rather, it is a world-building enterprise in the sense that it creates the context for our political imagination, the space where we can move and orient ourselves. Just as architecture and engineering construct the infrastructure of our physical world, so too does judging construct our world of imagination.

Arendt’s notion of judging as a world-building enterprise helps shift our attention from the familiar tension between relativism and dogmatism to a problem of a different kind: resignation. The ‘world,’ in Arendt’s terminology, refers to the fabricated world of human-made things. The world is not given to us by God or nature. It is a human achievement, and as such, it can remain in place only through our continued care for it. If citizens surrender their judgment to some necessary force, and hence fail to pay the price of their democratic citizenship, this will eventually spell the end of the common world. Of course, what Arendt means by “the loss of the world” is not that the earth will suddenly dissolve beneath our feet if people fail to engage imaginatively with common issues. What she means is that we lose the world as an object of judgment. If citizens resign from the burden of freedom, the common world will disintegrate and disappear from our political imagination. What is left to us then is no longer the common world, but our own private or social fraction of it – a fraction that we cannot share with people who are differently situated, and which can only even be recognized as real by those who happen to share our point of view. When we resign from the task of having to imagine what the world looks like from various points of view, the problem is not so much that we become “unreasonable,” as in unable to properly adjudicate between competing claims. Rather, the problem is that reality as such is lost on us: that we now really do live in separate worlds, not physically but politically speaking.

When human beings are unable or unwilling to pay the price for freedom, they deny it by resigning to thoughtlessness. This is a problem that democratic theorists must address. Resignation to thoughtlessness detracts from the meaning of the common world and our political ways of relating to it. It drives the erosion of the shared contexts that support our ability to endure the burden of freedom, and hence conditions us to turn even further away from the world. Thus, the modern withdrawal from the common world traps us in a vicious cycle of alienation and resignation. In this thesis, I have examined how this Arendtian interpretation of the problem of judgment can help us shed new light on the contemporary crisis of expertise. However, it could also be used
to discuss a wide range of other contemporary issues – including, for instance, the democratic threats posed by disinformation and AI.

**Contribution to the Secondary Literature on Arendt**

Arendt’s popularity has risen steadily in the half-century since her passing. Her ideas have informed scholarly discussions about a wide range of topics, including themes that Arendt herself did not take much interest in during her own lifetime (feminism is a case in point, see, e.g., Honig et al. 1995; Dietz 2002; Zerilli 2005b). However, the enormous literature on Arendt’s scholarship has not dispelled the ambiguities that surround her political thought. Her political orientation has often been interpreted as republican more than democratic (see, e.g., Canovan 1992; O’Sullivan 2009). However, as I have pointed out, many scholars have stressed her relevance for democratic theory. For instance, Arendt’s work has become a major reference point in the vibrant discussion about the tension between constituent and constituted power in democracy (see, e.g., Kalyvas 2008; Näström 2014; 2021; Markell 2006; Keenan 2003; Honig 2007). Regarding this issue, some have suggested that Arendt’s work, which emphasizes the miracle of new beginnings, provides a telling illustration of an authentic paradox, a contradiction that is ingrained into the very fabric of democracy (Keenan 2003). Others, however, argue that Arendt’s political thought reveals that this paradox is, in fact, an illusion that only betrays the limits of the concepts and categories that govern our standard theories of democracy (Markell 2006; Näström 2021).

This thesis is certainly not the first study that emphasizes Arendt’s relevance for democratic theory. However, to my knowledge, it is the first study that examines how her work can be used to illuminate the democratic value, crisis, and role of expertise. As Danielle Allen (2018) asserts in her introduction to *The Human Condition*, the impact of modern science and technology on public life is a prominent theme in Arendt’s writings. Her views on science have almost exclusively been read as deeply pessimistic and critical. According to the standard interpretation, Arendt understands scientific truth-finding as an apolitical enterprise that is invariably in tension with politics, which trades in opinion. It has, therefore, been suggested that her work offers a critical lens for discussing the alienating and destabilizing impact of science on society (Yaqoob 2014; O’Connor 2013), and that her ideas and arguments can help us expose the technocratic prejudices that underlie the modern political culture (Berkowitz 2021).

The constructive role that Arendt ascribes to science and scientists within the public realm has received considerably less attention in the secondary literature. This gap is addressed by Javier Burdman (2018), who attempts to sketch a more nuanced account of Arendt’s treatment of science and its relationship to politics. Arendt’s critique, he points out, is not leveled against science itself but against what he terms the “ideological scientificality” of a science that is driven by the urge to explain everything by reference to universal
laws (p. 489). Science, Burdman suggests, is indeed an apolitical enterprise in Arendt’s terms – yet it also plays a constructive role in the constitution of the political realm. Scientific facts bring stability to the political realm. They protect politics from “act[ing] against itself” and must, in turn, be protected from political suppression (p. 493). Thus, according to Burdman, Arendt ascribes a constructive role to science, which resembles that of architecture and engineering. Buildings, bridges, and scientific facts all have a part in setting the scene for political speech and action. Science can, therefore, be seen as a world-building activity that constructs the backdrop against which the drama of politics can play out.

In line with Burdman’s account, this thesis has emphasized the constructive role of science and contends that scientific expertise can be understood, in Arendt’s terms, as a world-building element within the public realm. However, my argument extends far beyond his claim that science should be acknowledged as one among many world-building activities. It is correct that Arendt sees all truths, including factual truths, as apolitical, even “despotic.” Truths, in her view, are coercive in their manner of assertion – they do not ask for our consent or woo our agreement; rather, they command our acceptance and leave no room for compromise (see BPF: pp. 235-236). Truths set the limits to what we may politically contest, bargain with, or agree upon. Nevertheless, scientific knowledge is not synonymous with truth, and what experts bring to public life are not just facts. What experts bring to the public realm is also their assessment, their advice, and their expert opinions about issues of political import. Thus, experts are not just neutral conveyers of scientific information – they are public figures who make sense of knowledge by constructing ‘expert accounts.’ From my perspective, experts do not merely operate in the background of the public realm but play a significant role in public sense-making. They are not just truth-tellers, in Arendt’s sense, but are better understood as engaged in an Arendtian practice of public storytelling. Moreover, scientific experts occupy a privileged position in the public realm. They are not just one category of world-builders among many – they have authority. With Arendt’s framework, we can therefore see that experts have a special standing in the modern public realm, and hence a special responsibility to participate in the construction of a stable and meaningful public context, a space for keeping in touch with our common world.

31 Merenda (2021) offers a similar interpretation and points out that Arendt, in Truth and Politics, describes factual truths as constitutive of “the very texture of the political realm” (BPF: p. 227). Factual truths are apolitical in the sense that they are beyond dispute and consent. Nevertheless, they have an essential role in providing the grounds on which political opinions can be built.
Closing Thoughts and Future Openings

Democracy is the only system of government that puts the fate of the collective in the hands of ordinary people. As such, it assigns a role to citizens that is both liberating and burdensome. The theoretical perspective that I advance in this thesis rests on the assumption that democracy can prevail only if citizens continue to find this role meaningful and tolerable. In a nutshell, my argument is that it is part of the expert vocation to support the ability of citizens to pay the price of their democratic membership in modern knowledge society. By creating and cultivating public contexts for making sense of knowledge, the experts contribute to the conditions in which human beings can bear the burden of their democratic freedom. Consequently, expertise corresponds to the existential, and not just the epistemic, conditions for democracy.

The normative approach that I develop in this dissertation revolves around the notion of expertise as a world-building factor in the democratic public realm. By exploring this Arendtian conception of expertise, I have taken the first steps toward developing a new democratic theory of expertise. The existential approach provides a new perspective on the value, crisis, and role of expertise in the democratic public realm. However, there are limits to the conclusions that can be drawn from it. The existential approach does not generate any concrete policy implications. It does not give us a roadmap that we can use to find our way out of the present crisis or a recipe for how to reinvigorate democracy under current conditions. Politically, it only hints in a certain direction – pointing to the need for shared spaces that invite us to engage in thought and action to the vast amount of knowledge that is now available to us. What the existential approach highlights is the democratic significance of meaningful contexts – the type of contexts that can redeem us to the facts and events of the world and open our eyes to unfamiliar and unexpected facets. Such contexts constitute the space where the common world can properly enter into our field of vision, thus serving as an enabling condition for a more meaningful and realistic politics. The only policy implication that seems to follow from this approach is therefore the somewhat vague recommendation that democrats should care for the spaces that have the capacity to stir reflection about common issues, as these spaces have the potential to serve as a source of renewal for the larger public conversation. Such spaces of sense-making exist within academia, but also in the realm of art and culture, civil society, and various grassroots organizations.

The existential approach holds that it is insufficient for experts to provide the public with scientific facts and arguments. They must also engage imaginatively with the issue that they are trying to account for. To make sense, they must put a “story” together. When experts engage in such sense-making, they operate as a world-building power in the public realm. However, the existential approach not only provides a new normative conception of the role of ex-
perts in democracy, but it also alerts us to how expert sense-making can become a disfigurement. This occurs when experts themselves are unable or unwilling to confront reality on its own terms, becoming trapped in their own ideas. Experts lose their capacity to bring the common world closer to public imagination when they are blinded by their favorite theories, or when they make up ideas or explanations that numb them to the new beginnings that continually push the world in unpredictable directions.

In their democratic vocation, experts must not only conform to the norms of science but also stay in touch with common sense. This is the normative upshot of the existential approach. However, naturally, there are limits to the normative guidance that can be extracted from this conclusion. One obvious limitation of this thesis is that it has not provided a thorough discussion on how we may distinguish expert world-building from its distortion. As argued, experts betray their democratic vocation when they begin to project their own intellectual fantasies onto the world instead of making sense of reality as it really is. Yet, how can we tell when experts have become hostage to their own intellects? And perhaps, even more importantly, how can we begin to recognize such unworldliness in ourselves? This dissertation does not articulate a standard or set of criteria that can be used to distinguish authentic sense-making from intellectual self-deception. Nor does it provide a thorough discussion about the institutional mechanisms that we need to resist or rectify such delusions. Consequently, the distinction between expert world-building and its disfigurement is one issue that remains to be further explored.

With this thesis, I have sought to develop a new normative perspective on the role of experts in democracy. However, my ambition has certainly not been to bring the debate to a final conclusion. Several aspects of the relationship between expertise and democracy remain to be studied, theoretically and empirically. My hope is that the theoretical work that I have undertaken can provide some direction for future inquiries. By way of conclusion, let me therefore address three such prospects for future research.

First, the focus of this dissertation has been on the relationship between experts and citizens, and more specifically, on how experts can support the ability of citizens to cope with the added burden of judgment in modern knowledge society. My decision to zoom in on the relationship between experts and citizens means that another important relationship has been left to the periphery: the relationship between experts and politicians. In Chapter 2, I briefly touched upon the responsibility of experts in resisting destructive political attempts to appropriate the name of science (see pp. 81-84). However, I have not discussed what it means for political actors to appropriate scientific knowledge in a way that is conducive to democracy. Nor have I discussed what it means for politicians to assert the democratic freedom to begin anew against the technocratic logic of necessity. To extend the existential approach by discussing its implications for the relationship between experts and politicians, therefore, is a task that remains open to future research.
Second, my focus in this dissertation has been on the conditions that enable citizens to cope constructively with the burden of judgment that falls on them in modern knowledge society. What I have not discussed, however, are the conditions under which scientists and academics can become willing and able to shoulder the responsibility that accompanies their public position of authority. This issue could be further explored both theoretically and empirically. More theoretical research is needed to deepen our understanding of the political significance of authority relations and the conditions for their renewal. The conclusions that I arrive at also highlight the relevance of empirical studies on the factors that may incentivize and/or disincentivize scholars and scientists to assume a public role, and how the incentive structures of academia and public life affect their management of these roles.

Last but not least, the thesis also highlights the need to further explore the normative significance of public sense-making more generally. The conclusions of this thesis particularly underscore the role of public narratives in both stimulating and repressing political action. The significance of narratives in the construction of both individual and collective identities has famously been discussed by thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, and Alisdair MacIntyre. However, the normative implications of stories and storytelling have hitherto received surprisingly little attention in the theoretical literature on deliberative democracy. In response to this gap, some scholars have suggested that deliberative democrats ought to develop a deeper understanding of the political contestation of narratives, and what it can tell us about the quality of the deliberative system (Boswell 2013). Others, however, argue that such attempts to integrate the concept of narration into deliberative theory could turn out to be a “Trojan horse,” which could eventually undermine the very justification of the deliberative democratic ideal (Engelken-Jorge 2016). Either way, the normative meaning of storytelling and its implications for our existing theories of deliberative democracy present important prospects for future research. The distinction that I have proposed between sense-making and reason-giving could potentially be a useful tool for such studies.
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