# Enriching Home Economics Philosophy with Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy in *The Life of the Mind*

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## Abstract

Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* was published the same month as Marjorie Brown and Beatrice Paolucci's *Home Economics: A Definition* (July 1978). Fifty years later, this monograph brings Arendt's notions of thinking, willing, and judging to the profession's attention. The intent is to augment its familiarity with Arendt's *The Human Condition* (i.e., labour, work, and action) entrenched in the three systems of action approach. Beyond an active life (*vita activa*), Arendt envisioned a contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) and an active mind. She strove to mitigate the impact of thoughtless conformity and resultant actions when people unquestioningly avoid internal moral conversations and end up doing the unthinkable and unconscionable. Morality and ethics depend on a contemplative life. With its focus on the home as a moral center for the good of humanity, home economics philosophy may benefit from Arendt's political philosophy.



**Keywords**: home economics, Hannah Arendt, political philosophy, thinking, willing, judging, vita contemplativa

## Introduction

After two world wars, German/American political scientist and political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was convinced that "the monstrous and unprecedented events [of the 20th century] had effectively exploded our existing standards for moral and political judgement... The shared basis of understanding... seems irretrievably lost" (Yar, 2001, Section 7, para. 3). This bone-deep conviction led her to write two three-volume treatises: *The Human Condition* (1958) and *the Life of the Mind* (1978).

Brown and Paolucci's (1979) seminal home economics definition and philosophy were partially based on Arendt's (1958) active life (the *vita activa*) concept: human labour, work, and action (McGregor, 2010). Written between 1956 and 1958, Arendt's publisher titled it *The Human Condition*. By combining Arendt's human condition and Habermas's (1971) communicative action, Brown and Paolucci posited the three systems of action approach as a way for home economists to think before they act. What combination of coping (technical), adapting (interpretive) and changing (emancipatory, critical) is best for the situation as determined by home economists working with individuals and families (see McGregor, 2014, for a detailed description)?

Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* was published the same month and year as Brown and Paolucci's home economics definition treatise — July 1978, meaning they did not have access to her work. Fifty years later, this monograph brings *The Life of the Mind* to the home economics[1] profession's attention.

### The Human Condition

Because Arendt's (1978) *The Life of the Mind* drew on her seminal 1958 human condition concept — for her, it was a sequel of sorts (Cornelissen et al., 2024) — a recap is justified. McGregor (2025b, pp. 96–97) summarized the human condition thus:

> As a caveat, Arendt's (1958) use of labour, work, and action does *not* mirror lay usage. Labour does not mean paid work, work does not mean to labour, and action does not mean physical movement or behaviour. Rather, she viewed *labour* as what people do to survive; *work* as what they do to build the world around them; and *action* as what they do beyond labour and work to thrive and gain freedom ... Humanity must engage in (a) repetitive activities that sustain life (*labour*) and (b) activities that leave behind enduring artifacts, institutions, laws, and structures for the collective human world (*work*, worldliness). (c) Humans must fulfill both labour and work activities so that meaningful *action* can take place through the shared enterprise of unpredictable and irreversible human interaction [acts and deeds]. Also, because human action is experienced through interactions with others in webs of relationships (through discussion and persuasion), people must be able to make promises to and forgive each other.

### The Life of the Mind

A brief history of the creation of *The Life of the Mind* is also justified given its incompleteness when published. Arendt started the book in the sixties. At the time of her sudden death (heart attack) in December 1975, she had completed the first two volumes: *Thinking,* and

[1] Ideas herein are relevant for family and consumer sciences, human ecology, family studies, consumer sciences, household sciences, home sciences, human sciences and other names for the home economics profession.

*Willing*. In fact, she had wrapped up *Willing* just a few days before she died, but *Judging* was barely started aside from some 1970 lectures (to be discussed). Apparently, a one-word title page for *Judging* was in her typewriter on the day she died. She strove to examine three mental faculties (capabilities) of the *vita contemplativa,* which she deemed essential to the nature of all political judgements (Cornelissen et al., 2024; Donoghue, 1979; McCarthy, 1978a; Popova, 2014; Tömmel & d'Entreves, 2024; Yar, 2001).

To further elaborate, two years before she died, she had delivered briefer forms of *Thinking,* and *Willing* at the University of Aberdeen's Gifford Lectures (1973 and 1974, respectively). Her friend, Mary McCarthy, arranged for Harcourt to posthumously publish these two volumes with Arendt's preliminary thoughts on *Judging* as an Appendix (Arendt, 1978). Arendt had delivered the latter during a series of 1970 lectures on Kant's political philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York city (McCarthy, 1978a; Tömmel & d'Entreves, 2024). Beiner (1982) published these lectures with an interpretive essay. Although Arendt had always envisioned *Judging* to be short due to lack of source material (McCarthy, 1978b), it has been suggested that her three-volume collection "might reasonably be supposed as her 'mature' reflections on political judgement" (Yar, 2001, Section 7, para. 1).

## Political Philosophy and Home Economics Philosophy

In a footnote, McGregor (2010, 2025b) had invited home economists to explore Arendt's (1978) *vita contemplativa*. In that spirit, this monograph provides a synopsis of *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt's poignant and intellectual elegance and grace (Popova, 2014) enables her contributions to offer rich insights into home economics philosophy. Her work matters to home economists because her avant garde "definitions [of thinking, willing, and judging] lead to consequences in the world and in ourselves" (Donoghue, 1979, p. 288).

Brown and Paolucci's (1979) home economics philosophy is steeped in Arendt's (1958) human condition construct, especially human action in the public sphere where politics play out (McGregor, 2010). They envisioned home economists becoming critical thinkers and *judges* of society, the polity, and the economy, so they can help individuals and families become self-empowered change agents working for the good of humanity through the home. I believe that *The Life of the Mind* (not published when they prepared their philosophical treatise) can augment their philosophy because Arendt was a political philosopher concerned with the political significance of thinking and judging (Basurto, 2016).

Arendt's (1978) musings merit home economists' attention for another reason — political philosophy and home economics philosophy are both normative in nature meaning they are concerned with what ought to and *should* be done rather than how things are done (Arneson & Bowle, 2025; Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2025b). Also, Brown and Paolucci (1979, p. 16) pointedly engaged with thinking and judging although not explicitly from Arendt's perspective. "It is important that the self as thinker involve judgement and not mere decision making. ... The process of judging ... brings fact and value together cooperatively in deliberation and judgement; the latter is choice among means to ends."

Herein, I presume that political philosophy can inform home economics philosophy. The former deals with how government power, forms of government and governance, and political arrangements impact (a) justice; (b) rights, (c) responsibility (self-assumed); (d) externally imposed obligations — moral, legal, political, and social; (e) equality and equity; and (f) liberty and freedom. These principles shape the ethical and moral foundations of politics, which

influence citizens, families, and communities (Arneson & Bowle, 2025; Sankowski, 2005).

Political philosophy also deals with key dimensions of human life that similarly concern home economics: (a) the beliefs and values that should guide political decisions, (b) the distribution of power, (c) the best organization of collective human life and (d) the relation between individuals and society. It does this by critically scrutinizing the political system and tendering alternative views (Arneson & Bowle, 2025; Sankowski, 2005).

Home economics also critically scrutinizes and judges systems, so it can posit alternative views conducive to self-empowered individuals and families (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). Their deep discussion of thinking in home economics could not reflect Arendt's unpublished volumes. They delved into freedom based on her 1958 human *action* construct but did not engage with willing or judging at all. Arendt's (1978) formulation of these ideas is now shared in anticipation of home economics' critical engagement with them.

## Thinking

Most societies have rules and practices that maintain order, structure, and safety. Unfortunately, these rules sometimes make *thinking* unnecessary, especially when people become complacent and behave automatically and uncritically. When people forfeit their responsibility to think, they compromise universal ethical ethos and community-bound moral mores. Not thinking threatens their ability to question the world or consider what others are experiencing. Arendt (1978) called this living blindly, deluded (i.e., persuaded to believe something incorrectly).

### Radical vs Banal Evil

The impetus for *The Life of the Mind* was her observations and reporting of Adolf Eichmann's war crime trial for *The New Yorker* magazine. He was a Nazi bureaucrat responsible for organizing the Holocaust and eventually hung for his crimes in 1962. She "argued that Eichmann's crimes resulted not from a wicked or depraved character but from sheer 'thoughtlessness': he was simply an ambitious bureaucrat who failed to reflect on the enormity of what he was doing" (Johnston, 2025, para. 6). She subsequently revised her earlier description of evil as *radical* (Arendt, 1951) and described it as *banal* instead (Arendt, 1963). An extremely average person can have no internal moral conversations about their actions and end up doing the unthinkable, unconscionable, and immoral (Goodyear, 2021; Mackness, 2025).

#### *Radical Evil*

Radical evil destroys the very concept of humanity through the systematic attempt to render people entirely valueless and disposable. Once people are no longer useful for consolidating domination and power, they can be discarded as garbage. With radical evil, humans become superfluous — unnecessary and worthless (Arendt, 1951; Goodyear, 2001; Mackness, 2025). Radical evil is spread by stripping people of civil liberties and freedoms, orchestrating and perpetuating social inequity, concentrating wealth and power, destroying democratic institutions, and perverting constitutional rights (Hedge, 2019). Radical evil "cannot be encompassed by conventional categories of thought [and] has no humanly comprehensible motives" (Kohn, 2001, para. 18).

#### *Banal Evil*

In contrast, banal evil happens when immoral principles are normalized — something previously considered unacceptable is now treated as normal, usual, or expected. People see no need to scrutinize everything they might otherwise adopt or conform to unconsciously or to think about different viewpoints (Goodyear, 2021). Banal evil "spreads through shallow passivity, a

lack of interest in engaging beyond the surface" (Maden, 2024, para. 24). Passivity means accepting or allowing what happens or what others do without actively responding, resisting, questioning, or pushing back (Brookes, 2024).

Arendt (1978) was convinced that some people are so passively shallow (i.e., there is no evidence of thinking at all) that it is impossible to trace their deeds to a deeper level (i.e., dangerous ideological convictions or radical evil desires). While deeds can be monstrous and evil, doers can be quite *ordinary* (banal) in their thoughtlessness. For most people, not stopping to think is an *ordinary* part of everyday life. Banal evil is, thus, "the human capacity to do wrong when you stop thinking [and questioning], or simply the reluctance to ever imagine what the other person is experiencing" (Mackness, 2025, para. 7).

Although not the best-received characterization, banal was what Arendt chose and then proceeded to write her three-volume book — *The Life of the Mind.* The *Thinking* volume comprises four sections: (a) appearance; (b) mental activities in a world of appearances, (c) What makes us think? and (d) Where are we when we think? (Arendt, 1978). I begin with her understanding of thoughtlessness because it *so much more* than the dictionary definition of not considering consequences or not showing consideration for others (Brookes, 2024). Arendt formulated this construct for use in political philosophy and political science. I suggest that home economists can weave it into their home economics philosophy as well.

**Thoughtlessness**

Arendt posited that "a meaningful and worthwhile life depends [not only on labour, work, and action but also] on an active, balanced, and healthy interior life of the mind [or else we have] 'thoughtlessness'... a world devoid of thinking" (Jensen, 2020, p. 67). The lynch pin of her formulation of thinking was *thoughtlessness*, in particular thoughtless conformity to ideologies, systems, or orders from higher up.

To reiterate, Arendt (1978) had an epiphany while attending Eichmann's war crime trial. Evil is not just an attempt to make humans superfluous in a total drive for power and domination — radical evil (Arendt, 1951; Goodyear, 2021). Evil can also be banal (ordinary) due to humanity's thoughtlessness. People have the totally ordinary capacity to do wrong after depriving themselves of thinking. They are capable of being "uninvolved and irresponsible, unaware of their crucial role in the world" (Tubali, 2018, para. 6).

If he had felt connected to humanity, to plurality, Eichmann could not have done what he did — he would not have thoughtlessly conformed to Nazi doctrine and top-down orders, which supported genocide of an entire people. "For Arendt, it was not that Eichmann did not know what he was doing. It was that he did not think about what he was doing" (Lagrand, 2017, para. 6). To put it bluntly, "if her logic had to assume that the world is full of little Eichmanns, it also had to assume that the quality they (we) all share is not some inexplicable vice at the root of our lives but ordinary thoughtlessness" (Donoghue, 1979, p. 284).

Unthinking people fail to use (a) contemplation (i.e., think about profoundly and at length), (b) introspection (i.e., observing and examining one's own thoughts and feelings) and (c) self-reflection (i.e., analyzing one's experiences to understand what happened) as a basis for political judgement. This insight deeply informed her formulation of thinking. "Instead of thinking as searching for answers, she understands thinking as continuous questioning or wondering and as introspectively searching for meaning" (Jensen, 2020, p. iii). People search for meaning when they want to know purpose, significance or are seeking a deeper context for

richer, nuanced insights. Rather than *what is*, they are concerned with *why* or *what for.* With meaning (i.e., understanding, import, and significance) and a deeper sense of life, it is much harder for people to be thoughtless (Jensen, 2020).

The main takeaway beyond the war crime trial is that an *active mind* will *actively think*. But this type of thinking entails more than rationale thought; active thinking is a form of human action in the public sphere that leads to political judgements and action. "We must develop a thinking which leads us to wakefully engage with the world" (Tubali, 2018, para. 14). When wakefully engaged, people interact or participate with full consciousness, alertness, careful attention, and vigilance. They are fully present and mindful, rather than passively involved. Indeed,

> in the very act of thinking in this manner, one is aware that one is a responsible participant in the world. While often thinking is conceived of as a form of retreat from the world, disengaging from the flow of events and shifting to a silent retrospection, active thinking is like a commitment to think responsibly. (Tubali, 2018, para. 4)

Active thinking (i.e., meaning making) never ends, whereas intellect has an end — new knowledge (Arendt, 1978; Fadeyec, 2024). For Arendt, outward-looking intellect involves *knowing*; people want to gain new knowledge. In contrast, inward-looking reason involves *thinking*; people want to find meaning by making sense of what they know. Even after reaching a conclusion from their inward musings, an active thinker will go further and continue to question it, challenging every premise. "*To think is to doubt*" (Fadeyev, 2024, para. 4).

***We Thinking***

Arendt (1978) added two additional dimensions to thoughtlessness: *we* thinking, and solitary thinking. Regarding the former, she formulated thinking in collective terms. "Rejecting the type of thinking that puts the individual subject as the center of existence, Arendt [turned to] a 'we' consciousness [because] people are part of general structures [e.g., birth family, neighbourhoods, and groups]" (Tubali, 2018, para. 1). When one thinks, one thinks as a member of a community. *We* thinking is not "a form of retreat from the world, disengaging from the flow of events and shifting to a silent introspection. [Rather, it respects that] inner revelations [are dependent] on external events and circumstances [and] deeply intertwined with the world" (Tubali, 2018, para. 3). *We* thinking is possible when questions of conscience, imagination, and responsibility can arise and be engaged with others (Donoghue, 1979).

***Solitary Thinking***

Arendt (1978) further formulated thinking not as a lonely business but a *solitary* business — people keep company with themselves; they are at home with themselves. Loneliness is a negative, unchosen state of feeling deserted and abandoned, often rife with self-pity. In contrast, solitude is a chosen, positive state of being alone for inner thought and self-dialogue. People can be solitary and not lonely because they have themselves to think with (Stitt, 2017). "Speech with others is what makes [us] a political being ... speech with ourselves is what makes us thoughtful beings" (Donoghue, 1979, p. 286). In this manner, people are thoughtful when they show regard for and consideration of others' perspectives as well as their own with the latter discerned through inner self-conversations with the collective *we* in mind.

**Appearances**

Arendt (1978) formulated *appearance* to accommodate thoughtless people rendering

others invisible. “Appearingness is the essential condition of being recognized as a member of the community of human beings and the world and of being treated accordingly” (Han, 2012, para. 9). Remember, plurality means equal but unique (Arendt, 1958). For Arendt, thinking involves creating a space in which people can make their appearance in the world from marginalization, imprisonment, exploitation, and oppression. This requires thinkers to expose and tear down barriers preventing people from making an appearance on life’s stage. Thinking helps us *see* others as unique and equal individuals, which in turn helps them make an appearance (Stimm et al., 2020).

### *Shallowness*

Arendt (1978) further philosophized that people do not think just because they are puzzled, surprised, or perplexed. They also think so they can wander, wonder, and find meaning not truth; meaning helps ensure appearingness (Jensen, 2020; Stimm et al., 2020). For clarification, Arendt held that “truth and meaning are not the same.” Truth is objective with a focus on what *is,* while meaning is subjective and concerned with what *matters* or signifies. Truth deals with verifiable reality, but meaning is rooted in context, human values, and understanding (Popova, 2014).

In Arendt’s (1978) formulation of thinking and appearances, people dive again and again into the depths to give their full consideration to what *appears* in front of them. This dive offsets shallowness and is replete “with awe and curiosity for the appearances in the world” (Stimm et al., 2020, last para.). Arendt deplored shallowness; she felt that despite digging deep into what a thoughtless person does, it is impossible to find ulterior evil motives or intent. Their shallow actions are incomprehensible, yet, they commit monestrous, inhuman, even criminal deeds (White, 2018).

The Woke Movement is a contemporary example that challenges thoughtlessness. It is a broad cultural term for social consciousness and activism. This movement *woke people up* to systemic social injustices, oppressive structures, and inequities that make and keep people invisible. It opened a space where invisible people can make an appearance in the world to be *seen* and heard. It exposed the shallowness and ordinariness (banality) of today’s culture for the deep rifts and social and political divides that thwart appearingness (Berkowitz, 2022b; da Silva & Sané, 2025).

## What Makes People Think?

When Arendt (1978) queried “What makes people think?,” she was not concerned with the causes or purposes of thinking. Rather, she posited that people think because they do not want their entire community (the plurality) violated by thoughtless actions. “As citizens, we must prevent wrong-doing because the world in which we all live, wrong-doer, wrong-sufferer, and spectator, is at stake” (p. 182). Citizens are supposed to be more concerned with the world than themselves, which is best achieved through “the soundless dialogue between me and myself” (p. 185).

### *Two-in-One Inner Dialogue*

To better express her position on what makes people think, Arendt (1978) drew on Socrates’ *two-in-one* idea — the internal, silent dialogue of thinking where the self converses with itself in solitude thereby distinguishing true thought from mere opinion. This self-dialogue prevents moral apathy and thoughtlessness. She reasoned that this internal self-examination keeps people anchored in reality (i.e., others’ appearances in the world) and themselves. People

talk to and inwardly listen in partnership with themselves.

To elaborate, thinkers are two-in-one because they are keeping themselves company while thinking in solitude. In effect, the thinking process splits them in two (inner and outer). They have a silent, inner dialogue with themselves until they are called by their "name back into the [outer] world of appearances" (Arendt, 1978, p. 185). They then use their new thoughts to engage contentious, concrete reality. In contrast, a lonely thinker deserts themselves and, thus, remains one — never in self-dialogue; hence, never able to ensure appearingness.

**Where Are We When We Think?**

Arendt's (1978) answer to this seemingly mundane question is compelling. When we think, we are obviously in our mind, *but* we are having a conversation with *ourselves* while trying to find *meaning* rather than just considering or reasoning about something using our intellect. "What we find when we retreat into the solitude of thought is always a partner in conversation... Thinking is the 'soundless dialogue with myself'" (Lagrand, 2017, para. 14). To reiterate, thinking is solitary in that people are at home to themselves (Arendt, 1978). So, "if I do not wish to meet the person who is waiting for me at home, I can simply not go home" (Lagrand, 2017, paras. 15–16); in other words, don't think. Indeed, "the thoughtful person feels the gravity of facing one's self [sic] [but does so anyway]" (Lagrand, 2017, para. 15). How else can they legitimately engage in political judgements?

***Valéry — The Nowhere***

Arendt (1978) further enriched the answer to her question 'Where are we when we think?' with two additional constructs: (a) *Valéry* — the nowhere and (b) *nunc stans* — the now, the gap between past and future.

Regarding *Valéry* (named after French essayist Paul Valéry), Arendt (1978) posited that when people engage in thinking to find meaning and make sense of life, they withdraw from the concrete world of appearances and retreat into an inner, invisible life — the *nowhere*. They necessarily but temporarily withdraw from the material world into their mind — into *Valéry* (Popova, 2015). Ironically, this is a truly wakeful state that allows people to find meaning in life's unending affairs. Arendt called it an "absolute waking," a state of intense, focused wakefulness that pulls people from the everyday life and reveals life's essential questions (Berkowitz, 2013). "It can be a rude awakening, insofar as it tears one from the dream world of easy living and requires concentrated attention to difficulty" (Berkowitz, 2013, para. 5).

***Distillation and De-sensing***. In the nowhere, the material world loses its meaning replaced with "what, during the thinking activity, become meaningful distillations, [which are] products of de-sensing" (Arendt, 1978, p. 199). "What is perceived through the senses undergoes a twofold transformation, first becoming an 'invisible image' that is stored in the memory, and then becoming a 'thought-object' when the mind 'remembers, recollects, and selects' something particular from the storehouse of memory" (Bartscherer, 2021, para. 4). De-sensing generates distillations — the *essence* of things sensed (i.e., the core of the matter) and their meaning — which inform willing and judging (Arendt, 1978; Marková, 2022; Wieland, 2022).

Arendt (1978) further characterized the nowhere as a place where "the thinking ego has withdrawn from the [concrete] world of appearances and lost the sense of realness inherent in the *sensus commuis* by which we orient ourselves in this world" (p. 200). "We are aware of when we have withdrawn from appearances. ...We are not entirely absorbed by the absent non-visibles [that] we are thinking about but begin to direct our attention onto the activity itself" (pp.

202–203). She eventually acknowledged that "perhaps our question — Where are we when we think? — was wrong" (p. 201) because it intimated a narrow concern for the *topos* (space) of the activity when in fact we think in space *and* time.

***Nunc Stans — The Gap, The Now***

To answer the alternate question "*When* are we when we think?" she added the notion of thinking in *nunc stans* (i.e., the gap between the past and the future). Adams (2014) called this "non-time." *Nunc stans* (Latin, 'standing now, unchanging') contrasts with *nunc fluens,* 'flowing time.' This is our ordinary experience of time. 'Standing now' describes, instead, the coexistence of past, present, and future (i.e., timeless eternity, which is outside time — non-time) (Alfred, 2023).

When in the gap, "rather than freezing 'the' present in a temporal vice-grip between 'the' past and 'the' future, non-time plasticizes past and future, loosening its hold. Existing in such a non-time enlivens public freedom, enabling the collective ability to resist ... temporal imperatives" (Adams, 2014, para. 4). Arendt's novel formulation of thinking requires people to pause *doing*, so they can step into the gap, as thinking happens in the gap. People step out of reality to look at it, reflect on it and not resist it despite how unbelievable and outrageous things might be (Adams, 2014; Massey, 2011).

They do this in "the gap between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet'" (Adams, 2014, para. 4). In this space where the bond between the past and future has been loosened, "thinking moves along a diagonal 'thought-train' emerging from this gap" (Massey, 2011, p. 71). Popova (2015) called it "the mental space-time continuum through which our thought-trains travel" (para. 5). Arendt used this metaphor to refer to the train of thought triggered by concrete incidents that require thoughtful, active thinking (Hyvönen, 2016). The now — the gap where the train of thought travels — "is fully actualized only in the thinking process and lasts no longer than this process lasts" (Arendt, 1978, p. 209).

In short, Arendt (1978) espoused the permanent habit of thinking in the nowhere and the now, which represents the "quiet in the center of the storm, which, although unlike the storm, still belongs to it' (p. 209). Thinking this way, along this space-time continuum, people can eventually interpret the world differently and find new meanings to make sense of life; for Arendt, thinking is all about meaning making rather than gaining new knowledge.

## Willing

Grounded in her conviction that longstanding philosophical connotations of *will* (e.g., Aquinas, Scotus, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) could not adequately accommodate her formulation of *Thinking*, Arendt formalized her own version of *Willing*. "Instead of willing as implementing self-sovereignty (as in will-power), Arendt develops the idea of a non-sovereign Will" (Jensen, 2020, p. iii).

**Non-sovereign Will**

Conventional *sovereign will* (i.e., acting independently and without interference — free will and the freedom to make choices) is self-mastery (willpower) and self-serving. Sovereign will is antithetical to plurality. In contrast, *non-sovereign will* serves others and is exercised by acting together in shared public spaces with mutual responsibility (i.e., plurality — we are all humans yet are all different; each is equal but distinct). Freedom is found in the space between people through their shared speech and actions; freedom is not found in isolation by exercising one's sovereign will. Non-sovereign will is self-governance viable through interactions, mutual

recognition, participatory action, and shared responsibility (Arendt, 1978; Jensen, 2020; Lederman, 2021).

Based on her plurality concept (i.e., each is equal but distinct), Arendt (1978) argued that no one person can be sovereign and exercise their freedom and will because many people inhabit the earth, not just one person. "My freedom to act/do/choose might be unique to me, but my actions fall into a plural world to be judged... Freedom is... the freedom to begin something *with* other people" (Jensen, 2020, pp. 126–127). With non-sovereign will, people acknowledge their responsibility to each other in the plurality, which is necessary because "we live in a common world amongst other human beings who are independent and unique, with diverse and distinct perspectives" (Jensen, 2020, p. 127). Upon accepting that our very existence is contingent on other people (plurality), notions of individual *sovereign will* no longer suffice.

### Willing and Appearances

Arendt (1978) also linked willing to appearances (part of thinking). People bring new things into existence with their *will*, which is the human faculty (i.e., mental capability) by which they decide on and initiate action. She pondered "how this faculty of being able to bring about something new and hence to 'change the world' can function in the world of appearances" (p. 7)? Her answer was that willing is an internal activity that depends on withdrawal from the concrete world of appearances. External action then takes the inward spontaneity of the will and brings it into the shared, pluralistic world, where others can see one's will (i.e., it makes an appearance) and judge it. For Arendt, the will is an inner, future-oriented projection of self and public freedom whose fulfilment lies in external appearances and actions in the public sphere (Marková, 2022; Massey, 2011).

## Judging

Hannah Arendt regretfully died before finishing the *Judging* volume. Donoghue (1979) lamented that so many questions about judging cannot be answered because "Hannah Arendt did not live to answer them. ... It is sad" (p. 288). Unsurprisingly, it is "a challenging task to comprehend the concept of judgement in Arendt's [incomplete] writings" (Dang, 2019, p. 19). "The extant sections of *The Life of the Mind* conclude at a somewhat theoretical impasse [and] remain a matter of considerable conjecture" (DeCaroli, 2007, p. 362). The attempt herein to describe Arendt's evolving perspective on judging represents a humble offering.

Basically, Arendt presumed that people should set aside their preferences and self-interest and "instead judge from the perspective of what we share in common with others" (Yar, 2001, Section 7, para. 3). Any resultant individual judgments can then claim public validity (Yar, 2001). Indeed, Arendt pioneered the idea that judgement is a political competence or human faculty — a form of both civic interaction and political communication. People reflect on their opinions through integrating others' opinions into their considerations. This form of judgement is politically valid (Baesler, 2024).

Arendt's (1978) formulation of *Judging* includes, among other things, freedom, taste and reflective judgements, actor and spectator judgements, *sensus communis*, and conscience.

### Freedom

As a political philosopher, Arendt (1978) was concerned with political judgement, which is the complex process of evaluating political situations, policies, and actions (actualized and potential). Political judgements normally entail outward-looking actions such as reasoned choices about collective action, understanding relative merits and consequences of different options, and

navigating competing values and principles (Steinbergr, 2018; Vandamme, 2021).

But Arendt's (1978) unique formulation of political judgement is very inward looking. As Basurto (2016) explained, she posited that when making political judgements, people ask themselves to what extent they can live in peace with themselves if they commit to certain deeds. Instead of *independent thinking* to find the truth, people engage in *independent judging* to find what is morally right, so they can live with themselves. This is possible because they can make autonomous moral decisions; that is, they have freedom of action in the public sphere where policy is formed.

Arendt (1978) further distinguished between *individual freedom* and *public freedom* (an attribute of the community rather than an individual). Her notion of judging was based on public freedom gained in the human-made public space where everyone is unique but equal and free to act (deeds) (Arendt, 1958). She also differentiated between *liberation* (i.e., freeing people from oppression) and *freedom* with the latter gained when people dialogue together (i.e., negotiate understandings) in the public sphere to jointly determine public affairs, including making political judgements (Dang, 2019).

**Taste and Reflective Judgement**

Taste and reflective judgement are dimensions of judging that Arendt (1978) appropriated from Kant's (1790/1987) *Critique of Judgement* and adapted. DeCaroli (2007) recognized the "tremendous difficulty of drawing reflective judgment into the framework of a philosophical system, and that this difficulty is bound not merely to a philosophical problem concerning thought, but to a political problem centered on judgment" (p. 366).

Arendt (1978) embraced this challenge. She perceived that Kant viewed taste as someone's (dis)pleasure with an object's form (e.g., an art work) (aesthetics). His notion of taste excluded interest in the object or its utility, just a judgement on whether they liked it or not — "Not to my taste." Kant believed that people are satisfied with their own taste (egoism) and "unphased by the criticism or even ridicule of others. [They] see no value in conferring with others ... to determine the truth or falsity of their judgements" (Dunn, 2020, p. 249).

Arendt (1978) took a different stance when she applied taste to the political realm. Taste is more than one's private preference; it is a social phenomenon (Daines, 1989). Arendt firmly believed that taste is exercised when people consider the judgements of others alongside their own. "Taste plays a central role in displacing egoism" (Dunn, 2020, p. 250). Taste is "neither a private feeling nor a universal preference but rather a type of community sense... The validity of judgement depends on the power of agreement to which the communications with others eventually come" (Dang, 2019, p. 22).

In other words, the political judgement has to be valid for everyone. To that end, Arendt (1978) formulated taste as the ability to communicate a judgement to others when there are no rules or standards; taste is a human *political* faculty (mental capability) not an aesthetic faculty like Kant had envisioned. People exercising their political taste and reflective judgements can build community in the public sphere (Berkowitz, 2022a; Champlin, 2013).

To elaborate, there are no general rules or standards to apply when judging the harsh realities of life like there are when aesthetically judging a painting or house. Kant (1790/1987) called the latter "determinative judgements" because they are determined relative to an accepted rule. However, Arendt (1978) had observed a crisis of culture, whereby people were facing things they had never seen before and for which there were no standards to judge them. In these

situations, any political judgements required reflective judgements, which can only be reached with active thinking within one's mind with oneself *and* then with others who share the public sphere. This can lead to new agreed-to general rules and standards for judging political scenarios (Berkowitz, 2022a; Dunn, 2020).

Arendt said that judgements (taste exercised) happen when people transcend their own opinions and interests and remain open to them being disputable and contestable in the public sphere (Basurto, 2016; Dunn, 2020). "One can only 'woo' or 'court' the agreement of everyone else. And in this persuasive activity one actually appeals to the 'community sense'. In other words, when one judges, one judges as a member of a community" (Arendt, 1978, p. 221). To reiterate, taste is more than one's private preference; it is a social phenomenon (Daines, 1989). Judgements happen in the human-made public community space where opinions are weighed and political freedom is gained in conjunction with active thinking, which seeks meaning.

In her adaptation of taste, Arendt (1978) replaced Kant's *Vernunft* (reason) and *Verstand* (intellect) with *Verstehen* (understanding, meaning) (Yar, 2001). Judging involves "a quest to understand the *meaning* in our world, the ceaseless and restless activity of questioning that which we encounter. The value of thinking is that it ... constantly returns to question again and again the meaning" (Yar, 2021, Section 7, para. 2). The foundation of authentic politics is "understanding the others' points of view from the vulnerable and inconclusive position of [expressing one's opinion as] 'it appears to me' [instead of a definitive 'I know']" (Basurto, 2016, p. 326). Instead of seeking general agreement on their opinions, people expect them to be disputed and contested. The requisite dialogue to negotiate understandings negates unreflective judgements.

***Moral vs. Political Judgements***

For further clarification, Arendt (1978) distinguished between moral and political judgement. *Moral judgement* is inward and self-referential as noted — people must decide if they can live with themselves if they perform a specific deed. In contrast, *political judgement* is outward directed and anchored in the public realm. It relies on others' perspectives, view points, and opinions and is intersubjective (i.e., shared by more than one conscious mind) rather than subjective (one unconscious mind). She used the phrase "intersubjective *contestability*" (Basurto, 2016, p. 329).

**Actor and Spectator Judgement**

Arendt (1978) also distinguished between the political actor's judgement (*vita activa*) and the political spectator's judgement (*vita contemplativa*). Regarding the latter, when people assume a role in political life, they become more than an actor. They are also a spectator whose task is to "stand apart from the practical life of humans that he/she might pass judgement upon it" (Yar, 2000, p. 14). The spectator first "'goes visiting' in their imagination [to] see better, understand more" (Yar, 2000, p. 23) and then renders judgement. Spectators, who are not involved in actors' deeds but can see hidden things, use this distance to discern different meanings and render different judgements than the actors would. "Meaning is revealed to those who restrain themselves from acting" (Arendt as cited in Beiner, 1982, p. 55).

***Imagination***

She further argued that both actor *and* spectator judgments depend on imagination (i.e., what she called enlarged empathy), which involves stepping into other people's shoes and envisioning different possibilities. Imagination makes judging possible (Arendt, 1978; Beiner, 1982). To exercise judgement, actors, who cannot see the whole, should (a) put their idea or deed

out there for spectators to heed, (b) collectively reflect on it in the public sphere and (c) render a reflective judgement informed by imagination. Meaning is only achievable after actors' actions are interpreted by impartial spectators who can see the whole, whereas actors are too blinkered from or too embedded or vested in reality (Basurto, 2016; Beiner, 1982; Yar, 2000). The threat of egoism and living blindly, deluded, is why Arendt formulated political judgement as she did.

**Sensus Communis**

Kant (1790/1987) posited that judgements of sight, sound, touch, and smell can be conveyed or communicated, but *taste* is so personal it cannot. For him, *sensus communis*, which was "neither community spirit nor social consensus, neither common human understanding nor sound understanding, has to be identified [as] a shared sense" (Van den Braenbussche, 2000, para. 9). Adapting Kant's notion of *sensus communis*, Arendt (1978) formulated taste as a faculty of political judgement that includes "a sense of *common to all"* (p. 268) (i.e., shared community sense rather than common sense).

For Arendt, *sensus communis* involves people's ability to imagine others' judgements into something relevant for political judgement. Her adaption ensures that *sensus communis* (community sense) and thoughtfulness became new rules and standards for political judgement (Benjamin, 1992). "Judgment for Kant is only a faculty of the mind but for Arendt it depends on actual interaction with others" (Champlin, 2013, para. 2). Unlike common sense, which is judgement without reflection (i.e., individuals unquestioningly apply understandings shared by most people), *sensus communis* involves reflective judgement to generate unique understandings. The meaning contained in the judgement is imputed to everyone in the community leading to "general agreeability" (Basurto, 2016, p. 324).

**Conscience**

Finally, Arendt (1978) eschewed Kant's (1790/1987) focus on the relation between thinking and morality and focused instead on the relation between conscience and morality, although she did not "inquire deeply into conscience" (Adair-Toteff, 2022, p. 1)."The moral act of refraining from wrongdoing depends on fear of remorse in the form of *conscience*, which is the constant cross-examination of one's self [sic]" (Basurto, 2016, p. 323). For Kant, morality has no place in judging; the moral question of right and wrong should be decided by reason. Arendt (1978) disagreed and said that right and wrong should be decided by judging, especially when morality has broken down.

Conscience refers to a moral compass, while thinking involves questioning. People's conscience emerges as a result of their active thinking, which requires stepping back from and reflecting on the world (Arendt, 1978). Because Eichmann followed his conscience without thinking, his thoughtless actions were perverted — unconscionable. Adair-Toteff (2022) called this "a deformed consciousness" (p. 1). Arendt also viewed conscience as rooted in a person's self-dialogue that inturn grounds moral action in intersubjective, critical engagement with the world (Adair-Toteff, 2022). Actually, "conscience is not automatically active in everyone, instead conscience needs to be brought about by [active] thinking" (Mauss, 2022, p. 2).

## Discussion

As a caveat, I know that her characterization of evil as banal was vehemently rejected and remains contentious (White, 2018). After all, banality means ordinary, and it is hard to accept that there is anything ordinary about evil. Nonetheless, history shows a consistent human willingness to create exceptions that justify evil acts, making evil a constant, powerful force even

if good remains the proclaimed ideal (Caplan, 2012).

That said, while researching and authoring this monograph, I came to appreciate that Arendt (1978) had recognized insidious banality, which is not as confrontable as ideological evil or an inherent, built-in human tendency toward malevolence and maleficence. Worse, adhering to a dangerous ideology, unquestionably following top-down orders, and/or acting on an inclination toward malevolency further exacerbates the banality (Huang, 2025; Stonebridge, 2024). For Arendt,

> Eichmann was banal. This didn't mean he was not evil — he was definitely evil — but that the evil he represented is going to be far more difficult to counter. [Like most ordinary humans] Eichmann was thoughtless [and] couldn't grasp the world that was full of plural, different people. So he eliminated a section of it [by following orders to do so]. [Arendt believed that] this ... thoughtless evil had got into our culture and was spreading like fungus. ... Once you've decided that some people's lives are not important or not as valuable as others, you are already walking into trouble. (Stonebridge, 2024, para. 4)

With this clarifying insight, while anticipating lingering resistance to evil as banal, I humbly suggest that the home economics profession can expand its already rich philosophical repertoire (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2022, 2025a, 2025b) by considering Arendt's (1978) unique philosophical political contributions in *The Life of the Mind* (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Political Philosophy Constructs from Arendt's (1978) The Life of the Mind*

| **Political Philosophy Construct** | **Arendt's Formulation** |
|---|---|
| ***Thinking*** | |
| Thoughtlessness | This refers to the human capacity to do wrong after depriving oneself of thinking. People are irresponsible and uninvolved with the world. They thoughtlessly conform without questioning right or wrong. They fail to reflect, contemplate or use introspection when making judgements. They are not awake to the world and the impact of their actions. Meaning making never happens. |
| Reflective judgement | This entails contemplation (i.e., think about profoundly and at length), introspection (i.e., observing and examining one's own thoughts and feelings) and self-reflection (i.e., analyzing one's experiences to understand what happened) as a basis for political judgement and subsequent political actions. |
| *We* thinking | This means thinking as a member of a community. Inner judgements and meanings are dependent on external circumstances and deeply intertwined with locality and the world. |
| Solitary and solitude | When people think, they are solitary (not lonely) because they have an inner dialogue with themselves. Speech with ourselves in solitude makes us thoughtful beings. |
| Appearances | This is the essential condition of being recognized as a member of the community of human beings and the world and being treated accordingly. People are *seen* by others and no longer invisible. People work to take down barriers preventing people from |

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|---|---|
| | making an appearance in the world. |
| Shallowness | People fail to delve into the depths of the situation they are confronting; they fail to engage beyond the surface. Their lack of serious thought leads to incomprehensible (often monstrous and morally wrong) actions. When others look deeper to see motive, they do not find it — just thoughtlessness. |
| What makes people think? | People actively think because they do not want the entire community (the plurality) violated by thoughtless actions. They think so they can wander, wonder, and find meaning. |
| Two-in-one inner dialogue | The thinking process splits people in two (inner and outer). They have a silent, inner dialogue with themselves until they are called back to the outer concrete world of appearances. The self converses with itself in solitude. |
| Where are we when we think? | We are in our mind having a conversation with ourselves while trying to find meaning that will be used in a political judgement. We are in a soundless dialogue with ourselves — partners in an inner conversation. This is different from being in our mind and using our intellect to reason. |
| *Valéry* — The nowhere | This is the inner mind where people think *with* themselves. This wakeful state lets them find *meaning* in life's affairs by revealing and engaging with life's essential questions. To enter the nowhere, people are torn from easy living, so they can concentrate their attention on difficulties. |
| De-sensing and distillations | In Valéry, what people perceive with their senses undergoes a transformation. First it becomes an invisible image stored in their memory. Second, when needed, it becomes a *thought-object* that reflects the true essence or distilled core matter of an issue with its own meaning that was generated during the active thinking process. |
| *Nunc Stans* — The now | People stop *doing* and step into the gap between the no longer (the past) and the not yet (the future) and actively think. Arendt called this the quiet center in the middle of the storm. People stop resisting reality and think on it. Their *train of thought* unfolds within this gap until they are called back to the concrete world to apply the new meaning they have found while actively thinking. |
| ***Willing*** | |
| Sovereign will | Exercising one's will brings something into existence. Sovereign will is individual free will, the ability to act independently, and the freedom to make choices. It is self-serving. |
| Non-sovereign will | Non-sovereign will is *dependent*; people exercise their will (bring something into existence) with others in the public realm. People's *will* serves others in the public sphere and community, as they acknowledge their mutual responsibility to each other and the collective. Although each person's freedom to act is unique to them, their actions (their *will* manifested) fall into the plural world to be judged. |
| ***Judging*** | |
| Public freedom | Public freedom (compared to individual freedom or liberation from oppression) is found in the public space where policy is made among people through shared speech, actions, and deeds. Everyone is unique but equal and free to act. When one judges, one does so as a community member. People judge from the perspective of what they share in common with others. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Independent judgment (moral judgement) | This judgement is inward looking in that people ask themselves to what extent they can live with themselves if they commit to a specific deed. |
| Political judgement | When judging in the public realm with others, people rely on the latter's opinions and viewpoints, which are intersubjective (shared by more than one conscious mind) and contestable. Political judgements are outward looking. |
| Taste and reflective judgement | People's political judgements must be reflective (thoughtful). They use their *taste* (human capability to judge when there are no standards or rules) to build community. Taste plays a central role in displacing egoism (not questioning one's judgements). It is exercised when people consider the judgements of others alongside their own. They understand that their opinions are disputable and contestable. The validity of a political judgement depends on community agreement (intersubjective contestability). |
| Active thinking | Active thinking refers to constantly posing and returning to questions to find meaning (*Verstehen*). Active thinking happens in the public sphere and leads to political judgements and action. |
| Actor and spectator judgements | Unthinking actors committing questionable deeds cannot see the whole picture. Political judgements involve impartial spectators interpreting actors' deeds to find meaning and then pass judgement. |
| *Sensus communis* (community sense) | Taste is a political faculty (mental capability to judge without standards or rules) that includes a sense of what is common to all (*sensus communis*) reached through reflective judgement. Community sense is a standard for political judgement. The meaning (feeling) in the judgement is commuted to the entire community leading to general agreeability. |
| Conscience | Conscience is the constant cross-examination of oneself. Conscience (one's moral compass) involves fear of remorse and regret: *Can I live with myself if I do this*? Right and wrong should be decided by judging not reasoning. Conscience is not automatic; it is brought about by active thinking and thoughtfulness. |

*Source*: Author's compilation.

Beyond an active life (*vita activa*) (the human condition) (see McGregor, 2010), Arendt (1978) envisioned an active mind and a contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) grounded in thinking, willing, and judging as she had adapted and formulated them. She strove to mitigate the impact of thoughtless actions that happen when people unquestioningly conform, follow orders, or wear blinders. For her, evil was no longer an inherent or innate part of being human. Rather, anchored in thoughtlessness, evil is banal in that people *ordinarily* avoid internal moral conversations about their actions and end up doing the unthinkable, unconscionable, and immoral.

I became convinced that the essence of her full conceptualization of *vita contemplativa* has merit for home economics. She posited that thoughtfulness and morality depend on inner self-dialogue pursuant to her formulation of thinking, willing, and judging (Arendt, 1978). Home economists strive for moral maturation by instilling moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation, and moral character (Arcus, 1999; Kuswardinaha et al., 2020). With its focus on the home as a moral center for the good of humanity (Brown, 1985; Brown & Paolucci, 1979; East, 1979), home economics may benefit from Arendt's political philosophy, especially when it comes to her formulation of thinking as meaning making rather than intellectual reasoning. The

two philosophies are different but compatible (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Comparing Home Economics Philosophy with Arendt's Political Philosophy*

| Home Economics Philosophy | Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy |
|---|---|
| hermeneutics interpretive and communicate mode of inquiry — meaning making through conversations and dialogue with others | hermeneutics two-in-one thinking — meaning making via inner dialogue with self in *Valéry* and *nunc stans* (the nowhere, and the now) |
| critical thinking — rational and efficient decisions to find objective truth | active thinking — thoughtful, reflective, moral judgements via conscience and imagination to find subjective meaning |
| critical science approach — use critical thinking and reflective choices to find *truth* to liberate from oppression, exploitation, and marginalization | use active thinking to find *meaning*, so people can make an appearance in the world as equal but distinct, unique individuals |
| individual home economists isolate in their mind to think about things to find truth; silent introspection with no inner dialogue | thinking for a thoughtful being is solitary not isolated; people engage in inner dialogue with themselves and then rejoin the concrete world with new meanings |
| people engage in reflective thought to find truth using existing rules and standards | people use reflective thought to find meaning when there are no rules or standards |
| common sense — individuals apply understandings shared by most people; common sense is things known to everyone, hence not discussed | community sense — each person perceives a shared world and finds meaning and makes judgments within it (a sixth sense); community sense is things not known to anyone, hence must be discussed |
| inclusion, diversity, and equity — recognition, fair treatment, and full participation of underrepresented and discriminated peoples | appearances — remove barriers that make people invisible and superfluous (unnecessary and of no value); they gain visibility and can make an appearance on life's stage |
| exercise sovereign will — personal choices made in isolation affect the collective | exercise non-sovereign will — personal choices made in the public sphere are *judged* by the collective |
| employ global perspective and sustainability with welfare of other humans, species, and the planet in mind; think alone as an accountable individual | use *we* thinking with welfare of community in mind; think as a member of a community where conscience, imagination (empathy), and responsibility are front and center; inner revelations are dependent on and intertwined with the shared world |
| lead in the gap with self-awareness so actions can align with values | actively think in the gap (*nunc stans* — the now) by retreating to *Valéry* (self-dialogue) to avoid shallowness and find meaning for political action |
| deal with morality and others' welfare with values reasoning to generate individual morally defensible actions | deal with morality and others' welfare by integrating others' opinions into deliberations while judging that leads to community-validated political action |

**Hermeneutics: Meaning Making and Understanding**

Embracing Arendt's (1978) formulation of thinking would involve balancing the profession's longstanding focus on outward-looking intellect, knowing, and knowledge building with a concern for inward-looking reason, thinking, and meaning making. This idea is known to the profession in the form of Brown and Paolucci's (1979) model of home economics practice that judiciously combines (a) analytical/empirical or technical, (b) interpretive and communicative (meaning) and (c) critical and emancipatory modes of inquiry (i.e., three systems of action) (see McGregor, 2014, 2022).

The profession has hewn to the technical approach for over a century — how to, coping with, and getting by (Brown, 1993; McGregor et al., 2004). Pushback came in the form of the critical science approach, where people use critical thinking and reflective choices to find *truth* to liberate people from oppression, exploitation, and marginalization (Johnson & Fedje, 1999; McGregor, 2025b; Vincenti & Smith, 2004). Using Arendt's (1978) contemplative life based on *meaning making*, home economics now has the chance to bolster the interpretive mode of inquiry by engaging hermeneutics — the art of interpreting things to create *meaning* or explain significance rather than narrowly focus on truth. "Understanding is always an interpretation" (Hultgren, 1989, p. 41).

The word hermeneutics derives from the Greek god Hermes who interpreted the Gods' messages so humans could understand them and find them meaningful. Because Hermes was a trickster God, it is also Greek *hermeneuo* meaning to decipher cryptic or obscure meanings (Hultgren, 1989; Peters & McCormick, 2008). Indeed Thompson (1988) described Hermes as "the protector of bridges" (p. 11) because he bridged the gap between unclearness and clarity by interpreting messages.

Home economists Hultgren and Coomer (1989) explained that the interpretive approach (a) seeks meaning, purpose, motives, intentions, and truth. It (b) engages with intersubjectivity or shared understandings through conversation (i.e., casual free flow of ideas) and dialogue (i.e., negotiations for understanding). And it (c) strives for sense making. This involves people jointly interpreting ambiguous experiences and information and turning them into plausible narratives, shared understandings, and common meanings shared by several people.

Brown and Paolucci (1979) added that (d) an interpretive approach uncovers hidden values and norms, so they can be intersubjectively validated to bring clarity. This strategy enriches people's understandings, meanings, and subsequent actions. Interpretive inquiry can, thus, provide a "basis to guide human lives and thereby improve human existence [and the human condition]" (p. 45) "Understanding the meaning of political phenomena, facts, and events, as well as the structures of human existence, presupposes an ... analysis of our lived worldly experiences" (Borren, 2013, p. 232).

Hultgren (1989) advised home economists that interpretation is necessary to make sense of or clear up something that is confusing, cloudy, uncertain, or incomplete. It is a "systematic search ... that seeks to clarify, authenticate, uncover or bring to full human awareness, meaning structures as expressed by persons in their everyday life-world experiences" (p. 41). Indeed, sometimes "incidents, facts, and events are not immediately clear to us. Experiences require interpretation in order to convince or disclose their explicit meaning" (Borren, 2013, p. 233). "It is only when something unexpected happens, when things break down or when for other reasons our attention is awakened, that the automatic pilot of everyday, implicit understanding makes a

place for the circle of explicit understanding or interpretation" (Borren, 2013, p. 240).

As a key part of hermeneutics, Arendt (1978) also employed the notion of *Verstehen* (understanding, meaning) to replace Kant's focus on intellect and reason. She opined that cognitive reasoning was insufficient in the face of events with no historical parallel. Facts and truth (if available) are not enough. People need to *understand* what is going on — the *why* instead of the what. This requires an intersubjective concept, whereby meaning making occurs between people not just within one person's mind. In that spirit, *Verstehen* deals with the plurality of peoples, many points of view, and enlarged empathy (Arendt, 1978; Basurto, 2016).

Home economists concur that *Verstehen* enables "a more comprehensive conception of understanding" (Daines, 1989, p. 69). As an aspect of hermeneutics, it accommodates "a process of 'coming to know' in a different sense — that of internalization and intersubjectivity, or a meeting of the minds [as people process and accommodate] multiple meanings" (Daines, 1989, p. 71). From a home economics perspective, *Verstehen* comprises dialogical thinking (i.e., the interplay of different voices), moral and values reasoning, a socially-conscious *sense*, and a critical approach leading to enlightened inquiry and meaning making (Daines, 1989). The next section applies the *The Life of the Mind* to home economics.

**Applying 'The Life of the Mind' to Home Economics**

When people do not think (thoughtlessness), interpretation (meaning making) cannot happen. So, if home economists drew on Arendt's (1978) formulation of thinking, they would work with individuals and families to help them avoid thoughtless conformity. They would caution them against shallowness and urge them to delve deep into life events and their attendant actions to make sense of them and gain deeper insights.

McGregor (2025b) encouraged home economists to be thinking professionals. But she envisioned this as an isolated affair (introspection), whereby they would think alone in their mind to arrive at truth, not meaning. Using Arendt's approach, home economists would, instead, assume that thinking is a solitary affair, and that solitude while thinking is a good thing. It does not mean we are alone and disconnected from others; instead, we are alone with our thoughts, which employ *we* thinking as a member of the wider community. People would not want the entire community to suffer from the fallout of moral decay because of their thoughtless actions.

When basing their work on Arendt's (1978) *The Life of the Mind*, home economists would also teach people to do more than exercise their sovereign will. They would respect non-sovereign will, wherein their freedom to act/do/choose is unique to them, *but* their actions fall into a plural world to be judged by others (actors and spectators). McGregor et al. (2008) concurred that although value judgements "may appear as personal choices... they have social consequences" (p. 51). Per Arendt, what people want to happen (i.e., their will) should be for the betterment of the community and humanity not just for themselves. People are mutually responsible for each other.

This is not a philosophical stretch because home economics has embraced a global perspective and advocated sustainability for decades. However, their concern was people thinking alone as accountable individuals using common sense (International Federation for Home Economics, 2019; Smith & Peterat, 1992; Williams et al., 1990). Using Arendt's formulations, home economists would also focus on community sense (*sensus communis*). It entails taste and reflective judgments (i.e., contemplation, self-reflection, and introspection), while common sense does not. Home economists would, by necessity, help individuals become

active thinkers. Instead of settling for an answer to a question, they would constantly return to and pose more questions, so they can eventually find meaning. They would continually wonder and wander to find meaning — "What is *really* going on? What is *really* being said even though it isn't actually said?"

Arendt's (1978) active thinking differs from the profession's longstanding focus on critical thinking, which strives for verifiable knowledge and truth but not meaning (Johnson & Fedje, 1999). The goal of *critical* thinking is to ensure rational and effective decisions by questioning assumptions, considering multiple perspectives, and seeking evidence and truth. In contrast, the goal of *active* thinking is thoughtful, moral judgements that emerge from an awakened conscience (i.e., constant cross-examination of self) and imagination (i.e., enlarged empathy) that lead to understandings, meaning, and sense making to protect the community from thoughtlessness (Učník, 2021).

On another front, home economists have long advocated for diversity, inclusion, and equity — the recognition, fair treatment, and full participation of underrepresented peoples (Dupuis, 2017; Prosper, 2025). In that spirit, they can opt to embrace Arendt's (1978) formulation of appearances. People are recognized as members of the political community and treated accordingly or else they remain invisible. This way they can make an appearance in the world and have their voices heard. The critical science approach is about liberating people from oppression, exploitation, and marginalization (Johnson & Fedje, 1999; McGregor, 2025b). Combining appearances and critical science is a powerful innovation that helps home economists render individuals and families *visible* on life's stage either as individual units or as a social institution.

Home economists have also been encouraged to lead in the gap just like Arendt (1978) proposed actively thinking in the gap. Andrews et al. (1995, 2001) promoted this idea with their reflective human action (RHA) leadership theory. They proposed that leading in the gap between stimulus and response, with inner self-awareness, helps home economists know that the action they commit to aligns with their value system (McGregor, 2025b; Stratton & Mitstifer, 2001). Arendt (1978) similarly called for stepping away from reality into one's mind to converse with oneself before rendering political judgements.

To elaborate, home economists would think in the space between the no longer and the not yet (Adams, 2014). Their train of thought would unfold with reflective, active thinking to find meaning thus avoiding shallowness and thoughtlessness (Hyvönen, 2016). They would distill (i.e., extract the essential meaning of something) disconcerting aspects of reality until they revealed the essence of what is *really* going on; they would use de-sensing to find real meaning, motive, intentions, purpose, and significance (Arendt, 1978). McGregor (2025b) would argue that this is aided by critical discourse analysis, which strives to reveal power and social inequities by analyzing and interpreting language to reveal unspoken messages.

On another front, home economics has long valued reflective thinking (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989; Johnson, 1952; Lee & Yoo, 2016) but assumed that people can use existing rules and standards in their thought processes to find truth. Arendt (1978) equated this to common sense, which is exercised individually with each person applying understandings shared by most people. Common sense refers to things known to everyone, hence not discussed (Krekovskis, 2022). However, Arendt thought common sense was an inner faculty without any world relationship (Sacasas, 2020).

She subsequently adapted Kant's community sense (*sensus communis*) so it became the fundamental human capacity to perceive a shared world and make judgments within it (a sixth sense). Arendt (1978) accordingly recommended reflective thought to find meaning pursuant to *sensus communis* when relevant rules and standards are missing. In her formulation, thoughtfulness and community sense *become* a rule and standard for political judgements. The rule or standard is that judgements are not meaningful unless they are thoughtful and include a sense common to all. Community sense keeps people from sliding into egoism (Sacasas, 2020).

Finally, for nearly 50 years, home economics has championed values reasoning to arrive at morally defensible decisions (Arcus, 1999; Mayer, ca. 1981). Because reasoned judgements concern the welfare of others, morality is the core of this reasoning process (Arcus, 1999). Arendt (1978) philosophized that morality should be decided by judging not reasoning, but values reasoning does not contradict this. On the contrary, Brown and Paolucci's (1979) description of reasoned judgements aligns with Arendt's (1978) outward-looking political judgement.

To elaborate, it contains many of Arendt's (1978) judging elements related to a group of people with common concerns: (a) self-awareness, which requires conscience and consciousness; (b) awareness of others' conscience (beliefs, and values); (c) mutual understanding of inward speech; (d) mutual recognition and responsibility; and (e) intersubjective agreement (see Brown & Paolucci, 1979). Both Arendt and home economists agree that judging must move "beyond a merely mental or academic exercise [as] morality is acting" (Arcus, 1999, p. 175). Just like Arendt (1978), home economists assume that judging should lead to action, especially political action (Arcus, 1999; Brown & Paolucci, 1979).

## Conclusion

The profession has always appreciated the importance of being politically active. Even before the Lake Placid founding conferences nearly 130 years ago, home economics pioneers were politically active (Brown, 1985; Stage & Vincenti, 1997). For nearly 75 years, the International Federation for Home Economics has had consultative status at the United Nations to inform family-related policies and programs (Arcus, 2008). It seems a natural transition to bridge the profession's longstanding political agency with Arendt's (1978) political philosophy espoused in *The Life of the Mind*.

I respectfully tender this monograph to spearhead and support any future efforts to deliberate, perchance embrace, Arendt's (1978) formulations of thinking, willing, and judging, so thoughtless actions are mitigated, meaning is corevealed, and moral standards are upheld. The more embedded these aspects of home economics philosophy become, the more effective and efficacious our practice will be in the face of monstrous and unprecedented events that continue to explode our standards for moral and political judgement.

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