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## “You Shouldn’t Try to Be What You Can’t Be”\*: How Wonder Frees Embodied Agency

**Abstract:** The paper presents the agency of human beings as embodied, i.e. it shows what it means to think about agency as founded on being a body (rather than merely exercised through a body). It is also argued that the free—i.e. reflective and spontaneous—exercise of agency should likewise be understood as embodied. The paper argues that both the appreciation and experience of the free exercise of embodied agency require wonder. The latter is defined as the attitude that facilitates the relationship of familiarization without appropriation. The paper shows how wonder contributes to the experience of freedom related to expressing one’s own unchosen (bodily) difference while relating to the differences of others.

**Keywords:** wonder, reflective judgment, embodiment, agency, freedom, transcendence, immanence

### Setting the Argument

In her daring book, *Pleasure Erased. The Clitoris Unthought*, Catherine Malabou tells the story of the systematic neglect of the one organ of the female body whose sole purpose is to produce pleasure.<sup>1</sup> In convincingly calling for more attention to the body in feminist reflection, Malabou’s focus on the “a-functional” clitoris ensures a non-reductive approach to the body. Is pleasure for pleasure’s sake not gratuitous? Malabou’s argument opens up the possibility of celebrating the

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\* S. Barrett, *Waving My Arms in the Air*, Parlophone Records Ltd. 1993.

<sup>1</sup> C. Malabou, *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought*, transl. C. Shread, Cambridge 2022.

female body in and for itself without contextualizing it in the potentially oppressive account of what the body can and should be able to do.

The question is, however, whether we can avoid the latter point—i.e. the question of what a particular body can and should be able to do—once we have accepted the conclusion that effectively follows from Malabou's argument. By celebrating the clitoris, Malabou challenges the domination of one model of the human body and emphasizes the diverse forms of human embodiment.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if we appreciate the plurality of human bodies, it seems necessary to ask: what does it mean to be a particular human some-body? What does it take to thrive as this some-body? Here, the question of what a body can and should be able to do—the question of the body's agency—inevitably suggests itself. Yet, it does so against the backdrop of some skepticism. The very focus on the plurality of bodies implicit in Malabou's study warns against potentially homogenizing and functionalist accounts of any body.

In this paper, I intend to meet these two seemingly conflicting objectives, i.e. to offer a way to talk about the agency of human bodies without reducing their plurality. I propose to do so by considering the agency of human beings—including the experience of freedom in the exercise of agency—as embodied. I want to question the gap between facticity (the way we are) and freedom (our ability to go beyond what and who we are). I will treat the body as fundamental to the way that each person is: when I want to consider the given of my condition, I have to start from my body. But I assume that embodiment does not necessarily exhaust all the factors that pertain to the way that I am and that, in this respect, function like my body. While in this paper I focus on the body, my account of agency, if successful, should also cover this second sense of facticity.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, I will use the latter to illuminate the former in the part of the paper in which I move from judgment to the judgment of taste.

Questioning the gap between facticity and freedom is an outcome with potentially important political implications. My main objective is thus to show what it would mean to think about the agency of human beings and the related experience of freedom as embodied and to suggest the political implications of this understanding of agency. My main hypothesis is, in turn, that freely experiencing the embodied agency of human beings, as well as creating politics compatible with it, requires wonder, preliminarily defined as the attitude that facilitates (the relationship of) familiarization without appropriation. I understand familiarization without appropriation as the relationship in which the parties connect across, rather than despite, their differences. They reach out to and attempt to learn about (familiarize themselves with) each other but without trying to reduce (appropriate) each other's differences to the "comfort zone" of what is already known and fully transparent to them. For example, to approach my parents with wonder would mean for me, first,

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Emily Ann Parker's complex study of Western philosophy's hostility towards what she calls "the elemental difference" of bodies (E.A. Parker, *Elemental Difference and the Climate of the Body*, New York 2021).

<sup>3</sup> In this broader sense, facticity could be linked to Heidegger's use of the word *eigen* (one's own) and related terms, as discussed in Magdalena Holy-Łuczaj's contribution to this issue (see "Others in My Aging. [Confronting de Beauvoir, Malabou and Heidegger to Make Sense of Aging]").

to acknowledge that they represent a different generation than mine and also that, despite my inevitably getting older, they will never stop seeing me as their child, and, second, to try to understand what they do (in general and in our relations) by allowing for the specificity of their position.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, wonder engenders a relationship *par excellence* in which the parties relate to each other as different. Accordingly, the initial connection I am making between wonder and the intention to acknowledge the pluralism of human embodied agency is the former's sensitivity to diversity. The idea here is that wonder helps us relate to our bodily diversity in such a way that it frees up our agency in ways that I hope to specify.

### The Thyroid—Rethinking Human Agency

Malabou's book is important to me for two more reasons. Like Malabou, I want to give a special place to the female embodiment; however, rather than concentrating on the female experience alone, I treat the case as exemplary for thinking about the broader question of human embodied agency. My argument will thus move in a spiral way: zooming in on female embodiment and zooming out on human agency in general. Moreover, I follow the author of *Pleasure Erased* in suggesting a focus on a bodily organ. But, in contrast to Malabou's choice of the a-functional clitoris typically linked to female bodies, I propose to introduce as a point of departure and arrival a highly functional, sex/gender<sup>5</sup>-neutral organ—the thyroid. Shortly, I will explain why this neutral organ arises in questions of feminine embodiment especially.

The thyroid is an endocrine gland which plays a crucial role in the overall metabolism of an organism. A properly functioning thyroid—or, more generally, the successful performance of thyroid functions<sup>6</sup>—ensures the efficient transformation of consumed substances, including oxygen and the proper development of the organism. It could be said that the thyroid keeps things together for a body and gets it going. In this sense, the thyroid is crucial to the body's agency if agency is understood very generally as its ability to achieve and maintain its proper development. I will treat this bodily dimension of agency as essential to what human agency is in general. We are agents as bodies, meaning that we perform agency due to how we are organized as bodies, which crucially involves the proper performance of thyroid functions. On the whole, I want to treat the thyroid as a figure representing the embodied character of agency. While the paper is not, strictly speaking, about the thyroid, it uses it as a guiding image.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Iris Marion Young's discussion of a mother-daughter relationship in her paper "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," [in:] *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, R. Beiner, J. Nedelsky (eds.), Lanham–Oxford 2001, pp. 213–214.

<sup>5</sup> Rather than settling for either "sex" or "gender," I use the expression "sex/gender" to emphasise that femininity, masculinity and other sex/genders are the entanglements of political/cultural and biological factors.

<sup>6</sup> Patients with thyroid tumours often have the organ fully or partially removed. As a result, they need to substitute the actual functioning of the thyroid with proper medications.

Despite the sex/gender-neutrality of the thyroid, thinking about this organ justifies treating female embodiment as exemplary for thinking about human agency as embodied. This is for two reasons. First, there is a well-documented discrepancy in the incidence of thyroid diseases and dysfunctions to the disadvantage of female bodies.<sup>7</sup> While the reasons for this imbalance are still being researched, the estrogen and progesterone levels in female bodies have been cited among probable factors.<sup>8</sup> Possibly, the way in which female bodies are organized can interfere with the functioning of the thyroid and therefore with the agency of female bodies. A more general relevance of this point is that when we think about human agency as embodied, we need to acknowledge that it is (partly, though crucially) based on the factors over which we do not have agency. Human agency critically depends on the network of elements which interact, but also potentially conflict, with each other.

Second, some research suggests that there may be an association between certain forms of contraceptive pills for female-bodied persons and specific thyroid dysfunctions.<sup>9</sup> If this is so, then some causes of thyroid dysfunction are what we could call biopolitical ones—factors related to the political administration of female bodies. When thinking about human agency as embodied, we need to allow for the disruptive—but also potentially constructive—impact of the bio- and necropolitical regulations of human agency.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, since female-bodied persons who use contraception decide to intervene in the existing forms of the functioning of their bodies, they exercise their embodied agency freely. By the free exercise of embodied agency I mean the ability to reflect on and possibly change the existing patterns in which reality is organized, including both the materiality of one's bodies and the structure of our world. While I understand unqualified embodied agency as the body's general ability to strive for their development, the free exercise of embodied agency includes moments of decision and potential novelty. My point is that the free exercise of embodied agency should itself be conceptualized as embodied. It is not something that we merely do to our bodies but also something that we do as bodies and due to the ways in which we are structured as bodies.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. R. Castello, M. Caputo, "Thyroid Diseases and Gender," *Ital J Gender-Specific Med* 5 [3] (2019), pp. 136–141, doi: 10.1723/3245.32148.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem; J.E. Mulder, "Thyroid Disease in Women," *Women's Health Issues* 82 [1] (1998), pp. 103–125.

<sup>9</sup> F. Torre et al., "Effects of Oral Contraceptives on Thyroid Function and Vice Versa," *Journal of Endocrinological Investigation* 43 (2020), pp. 1181–1188, doi: 10.1007/s40618-020-01230-8; Y. Qiu et al., "Birth Control Pills and Risk of Hypothyroidism: A Cross-Sectional Study of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2007–2012," *BMJ Open* 11 [6] (2021), doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-046607.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. N. Lykke, "Making Live and Letting Die: Cancerous Bodies Between Anthropocene Necropolitics and Chtulucene Kinship," *Environmental Humanities* 11 [1] (2019), pp. 108–135, doi: 10.1215/22011919-7349444.

<sup>11</sup> The general outline of my approach corresponds to the philosophy of elemental difference recently offered by Emily Ann Parker. In her complex project, Parker proposes to go beyond the performative accounts of the differences between human beings. She argues that, while (as the philosophers of performativity emphasize) socio-political conventions, imaginaries, prejudices and institutions do crucially impact how human differences, including bodily differences, are figured, "no human invented the fact that human bodies are not all alike" (an insight which she attributes to Luce Irigaray; E.A. Parker, *Elemental Difference and the Climate of the Body*, p. 26). What she calls "non-universal

## Between Immanence and Transcendence

To begin to explain what is at stake in thinking about the free exercise of embodied agency, I want to take a clue from Iris Marion Young's classic paper "Throwing Like a Girl." Writing from the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist phenomenology, read along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body-centered phenomenology, Young argued that a female-bodied person experiences a characteristic tension. On the one hand, the female experiences herself as a transcendence—an agent capable of using her body for the purpose of going beyond the existing circumstances and initiating new projects. On the other hand, and at the same time, she perceives herself as an immanence—a being trapped in a body and reduced to the status of an object.<sup>12</sup> I will argue that the conflict described by Young is characteristic of the embodied agency of human beings in general, although different groups of human agents experience it differently and some more intensively than others. The tension between immanence and transcendence can be construed as fundamental to the experience and exercise of freedom for embodied human agents.<sup>13</sup>

The figure of the thyroid shows how. While the thyroid is itself a bodily organ, it ensures that the body can act rather than merely being acted on. But to better explain the connection between immanence and transcendence, we might link the conflict to an ambivalence that occurs in the work of Hannah Arendt, in her philosophically rich expression, "that which is as it is." The expression appears in two apparently unrelated contexts. First, Arendt used it when she talked about wonder as *thaumadzein*—the *pathos* reportedly experienced by Socrates and elevated by Plato to the status of "a feeling of a philosopher" and the beginning of philosophy.<sup>14</sup> "*Thaumadzein*," Arendt says:

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bodily events" (ibidem, p. 9) exists because bodies are elementally—and fundamentally—different and as such can receive differential treatment. Although quite common, the experience of having a female body is not universal (not all human beings have female bodies). Being a female-bodied person with a malfunctioning thyroid is a still less common experience. Even if some thyroid disfunctions can be caused by human interventions (such as contraception) which in turn are based on human evaluative judgments, it is a certain kind of bodies—e.g. female ones—that are being made vulnerable to harm: and "no human invented the fact" that female bodies differ from non-female bodies. Like Parker, I want to acknowledge this irreducible diversity of bodies that is acted upon but cannot be fully explained by socio-political factors.

<sup>12</sup> I.M. Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality," *Human Studies* 3 (1980), pp. 137–156. Young's use of the terms "immanence" and "transcendence" draws on the existentialist tradition. Cf. S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. C. Borde, S. Malovany-Chevallier, New York 2010; J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. H.E. Barnes, New York 1956.

<sup>13</sup> Young acknowledges that, once we locate agency in the body, we must accept that agency is always marked by the tension between transcendence and immanence, inasmuch as bodies are always passive as well as active. But what distinguishes female embodied agency is, according to her, the simultaneity of immanence and transcendence. Women are inhibited even when they engage in activity (I.M. Young, "Throwing Like a Girl," p. 145). It is a version of this stronger claim that I want to universalize and develop here, showing how it can actually generate the sense of freedom.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, transl. B. Jowett, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1726/1726-h/1726-h.htm> (accessed: 4.06.2023).

the wonder at that which is as it is, is according to Plato a *pathos*, something which is endured and as such quite distinct from *doxadzein*, from forming an opinion about something. The wonder that man endures or which befalls him cannot be related in words because it is too general for words [emphasis mine—UL].<sup>15</sup>

"That which is as it is" stands for something that cannot be assimilated into and expressed through words, proving that there is and always will be something beyond that which we are able to articulate. As such, the experience of *thaumadzein* could be linked to what Young calls transcendence. *Thaumadzein* has a liberating effect to the extent that it makes a person realize that they do not have to stay locked up in any specific mode of thinking and that there is always something more than what is accessible—what appears (*doke*)—to them at the moment. But this discovery is also upsetting in that it unsettles the apparent certitudes, making the wondering person speechless and, as a result, leaving them helpless.

Second, the expression "that which is as it is" appears when Arendt talks about the features of her identity that she believed were "given, not made." Responding to Gershom Scholem's criticism of her treatment of Adolf Eichmann's trial, she says:

I found it puzzling that you should write "I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way." The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I have never even felt tempted in that direction. It would have been like saying that I was a man and not a woman—that is to say, kind of insane. [...] I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is [emphasis mine—UL]; for what has been given and what was not, could not, be made [emphasis in the original]; for things that are *physei*, not *nomoi*.<sup>16</sup>

While the passage was inspired by the discussion about Arendt's Jewish identity, which remains its central focus, the comparison to sex/gender that Arendt makes is remarkable and suggests that she considered both the examples of what has been "given, not made." In this context, the expression "that which is as it is" refers to the factors that Arendt perceived as defining her as an immanence. *Physei* (as Arendt calls them) constitute specific background conditions, unchosen factors that set the general coordinates for who we are. And yet Arendt speaks of "gratitude for"—reconciliation with—these "given, not made" circumstances. As a result, that which is the most immediate and non-negotiable and that which stretches beyond the directly accessible come together *via* one peculiar phrase, "that which is as it is."

This is a very interesting consequence, suggesting the coincidence of the most familiar and the most distant. I want to argue that this synthesis happens through wonder. What Arendt calls *thaumadzein* involves experiencing the impossibility of appropriating that which (or who) evokes it. This is key to my own conception of wonder. Yet, I would add that the work of wonder does not end at that point. Wonder continues and helps the wondering person reach out to (familiarize themselves with) the "object" of their wonder without attempting to assimilate it fully. This broader concept of wonder captures the ambivalence of "that which is as it is"

<sup>15</sup> H. Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57 [1] (1990), p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> H. Arendt, "Letter to Gershom Scholem," [in:] H. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, New York 1978, p. 246.

signaled by Arendt. Wonder facilitates familiarization without appropriation, the dual movement to that which cannot be assimilated (transcendence) and back to the most immediate, to oneself (immanence).

Yet, if the concept of wonder, which Arendt seemed to reserve for the experience of transcendence, could be extended to cover both extremes of the “that which is as it is,” it is worth testing if the same transformation would work for embodiment as one of Arendt’s examples of immanence.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, I want to argue that it is because we are bodies that we experience the coincidence of immanence and transcendence (represented by the thyroid as a body organ that enables the body to act rather than just being acted upon) and that wonder plays a crucial role in transforming this coincidence into the sense of freedom.

### Judging Differences

A good starting point for thinking about the connection between wonder and the freedom experienced in being a body can be found in Luce Irigaray’s work. Irigaray dedicated one of the chapters of her influential study, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, to wonder. Engaging with Descartes’ classic presentation of wonder as “the first passion,” she argues that wonder is evoked by that which is new, surprising and “not yet assimilated or dissimilated as known.”<sup>18</sup> Because it is not limited by prior knowledge, wonder constitutes “the space of freedom between the subject and the world”<sup>19</sup>—it allows its “objects” to freely appear without being constrained by the subject. Irigaray’s approach supports my working definition of wonder. She presents wonder as the attitude of openness (familiarization), which creates a genuine relationship, i.e. it does not lead to the appropriation of the other person but, instead, respects their transcendence (“The other never suits us simply”).<sup>20</sup> In Irigaray’s arguments, wonder provides the context for the appreciation of sexual difference,<sup>21</sup> which should be neither assimilated as fully known nor rejected as abject but embraced in its specificity.

Irigaray’s reading of wonder in connection with the sexual difference focuses on the moment of transcendence, e.g., of opening up to the bodily difference of the other, such as the sexual difference. What interests me, however, is also how this effort of reaching out reflects back on the wondering person. Here, a story may help.

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<sup>17</sup> It is true that Arendt gave two different examples of what she described as *physei*—not only an aspect of her embodiment (her femininity) but also her Jewishness. Thus, she offers a broad understanding of immanence (or what I have earlier called facticity), without implying that either of them is more basic than the other. In what follows, I use some additional themes from Arendt’s philosophy to develop and justify my own account of the fundamental role of embodiment. However, I do not claim that this is the view that Arendt herself would fully accept. Neither do I comment on Arendt’s other example of *physis*—i.e. her Jewishness—as I am in no position to address this topic.

<sup>18</sup> L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, transl. C. Burke, G.C. Gill, Ithaca 1993 (1984), p. 75 (emphasis in the original). Cf. R. Descartes, “The Passions of the Soul,” *Early Modern Texts*, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1649part2.pdf> (accessed: 4.06.2023).

<sup>19</sup> L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

For a moment, let us turn to the theory and practice of The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective [MWBC], a group of Italian feminists active in the late 1970s and 1980s. Like Irigaray, the MWBC were interested in sexual difference, as evidenced by their major publication, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. There, the Milanese start from the experience of being a specific body—a female one—and want to develop this very fact “into the principle of our [women's] freedom.”<sup>22</sup> Their research thus complies with my argument to the extent that they were concerned with what it means to be free for a specific body. They emphasized not only the differences between women and non-women but also among women themselves.<sup>23</sup> Most interestingly, they discovered that it was through addressing their mutual differences that they began to experience freedom. And they came to this conclusion when they engaged in making judgments about literature (as befitted a group centered around a bookstore), which quickly revealed a great diversity of opinions among them.<sup>24</sup>

The experience of the Milanese received an interesting development from Linda M.G. Zerilli in her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*.<sup>25</sup> Zerilli turns to the Milanese as part of her search for an account of freedom that could help overcome what she sees as the crisis of feminist theory and practice. She argues that the understanding of freedom emerging from the practice of making aesthetic judgments discovered by the Milanese provides a good template for thinking about freedom both in feminist theory and political philosophy in general.<sup>26</sup> What the author finds particularly interesting is, first, that the judgment-making of the Milanese was a relational practice. She suggests that the MWBC members had been aware of the differences between them all along; what changed when they engaged in judging was that they began to express these heterogeneities to each other, formulating judgments about each other and making themselves vulnerable to each other's assessment. In the process, they began to actively negotiate the meanings of their differences rather than ignoring them or treating their senses as settled.<sup>27</sup> Second, Zerilli argues that the heterogeneities expressed by the Milanese through aesthetic judgements were irreducible to the general characteristics of their social positions, such as class, education, sexuality etc.<sup>28</sup> While it is evident that the social milieu can significantly impact one's aesthetic preferences (e.g. determining the type of music, literature, films etc. that the person likes), it also appears that, to the extent that the term “aesthetic preference” is to have any sense, it cannot lose its individual, even idiosyncratic, character (manifested, for example, in the choice of preferred composers and authors, as well as their works) altogether.

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<sup>22</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, transl. P. Cicogna, T. De Lauretis, Bloomington–Indianapolis 1990 (1987), p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> “We must not enclose it [sexual difference] in this or that meaning, but must accept it along with our being-body and render it significant: an inexhaustible source of ever-new meanings” (ibidem, p. 125).

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, pp. 109–111.

<sup>25</sup> L.M.G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Chicago–London 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Zerilli's later publication, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, Chicago–London 2016.

<sup>27</sup> L.M.G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, pp. 106–107.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 109.



The idiosyncrasy of aesthetic judgments points to their additional feature that Zerilli does not address. While the preferences determine how we choose, they—in their idiosyncrasy—are not up for us to choose. Arguably, there is even something compelling about them: one would say that they cannot help but like this particular song, book or film. This peculiarity of aesthetic judgments was recognized in the approach that inspired Zerilli’s own account, namely Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of judgment. On her part, Arendt drew on Immanuel Kant’s theory of the reflective judgment of taste to argue that it offers a good blueprint for theorizing political judgment. As she did so, she revised Kant’s principle of “enlarged mentality” (or “broadened thinking”), on the basis of which reflective judgments were supposed to operate, and re-read it as a matter of “being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, Arendt emphasized the impossibility of leaving one’s own idiosyncratic point of view behind<sup>30</sup> while also calling for the effort of reaching out to others.

Zerilli’s observations on the MWBC’s practice of judgment, supplemented with their Arendtian background, shed light on an important matter. If, as Zerilli argues—and so does Arendt in her way<sup>31</sup>—the practice of making judgments based on enlarged mentality is the practice of freedom, then freedom is what the person experiences when they express their own unchosen difference (“my own identity”) in the process of relating to others (“where actually I am not”). This expression of difference is, in turn, provoked by an object—say, an artwork (to stick to the original context)—which elicits the person’s response. The sense of freedom derived from judgment-making is thus paradoxically based on the simultaneous realization that things can be otherwise (that others can perceive the object in question differently) and that there is a specific way in which I am who I am (that manifests itself in how I perceive the object). The paradox is strictly connected to Arendt’s definition of enlarged mentality, which, in turn, effectively replicates the ambivalence of the “that which is as it is.” When I engage in an enlarged mentality, I both embrace that which is the most intimate and unquestionable for me (i.e. the immanence that I am) and go beyond it and towards the transcendence of the irreducible strangeness

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<sup>29</sup> H. Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” [in:] H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, London 2006, p. 237. Cf. H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Chicago 1992; I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, transl. W.S. Pluhar, Indianapolis–Cambridge 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. also Arendt’s remark in the essay “The Crisis of Culture”: “By his [sic!] manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is” (“The Crisis of Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance,” [in:] H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 220).

<sup>31</sup> Death prevented Arendt from completing her studies of judgment. But, based on her existing work, it could be argued that judgment was supposed to link the *vita contemplativa* part of the human condition, to which it technically belongs, with its active aspect (*vita activa*). While Arendt consistently argued that freedom can be genuinely experienced only through action, i.e. through initiating new events while relating to others, she also seemed to link the principle of novelty to the internal (“contemplative”) faculty of the will (H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing*, San Diego–New York–London 1971 [1977, 1978]), p. 109). Judgment, as the faculty through which we decide how things appear to us (how we want them, so to speak) and thereby show who we are to others, offers a way to externalise (and therefore: materialise) the ability to choose (H. Arendt, *Willing*, p. 217; H. Arendt, *The Crisis in Culture*, pp. 196–222).

and plurality of others. In the practice of judgment, the two dimensions of the "that which is as it is" meet to generate the sense of freedom. That which transcends me brings me back to myself: I realize that there are other ways of being than my own and, simultaneously, I embrace (and articulate) the right to be the way I am.<sup>32</sup>

The point here is that wonder, understood as the attitude that facilitates familiarization without appropriation, now appears to be an important part of the experience of freedom based on the practice of judging.<sup>33</sup> When interpreted in connection with judgment, familiarization without appropriation emerges as a reflective process through which I not only embrace the other person's freedom but also reconcile myself with who I am. The experience of freedom thus becomes related to owning up to being oneself without claiming to own oneself.<sup>34</sup>

Remember the thyroid. In my argument, the thyroid represents the ability to transform the given circumstances into the source of activity without escaping the very fact of being conditioned. After all, the thyroid is itself a body organ. Let me, then, go back to the body to show how wonder and judgment specifically address and express bodily differences.

## Wondering (at) Bodies

It is worth emphasizing that in Kant's original formulation from *The Critique of Judgment*, which Arendt embraced, reflective judgment was described as the judgment of "taste." While this use of the term was conventional, Arendt commented on the specificity of the sense of taste, emphasizing its private character.<sup>35</sup> This

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. also Magdalena Holy-Luczaj's paper in this issue on the worldly (relational) character of self-disclosure in Heidegger.

<sup>33</sup> To better integrate wonder into the account of reflective judgment, it could be added that enlarged mentality structurally requires wonder. The openness to differences as differences is what motivates the effort of going beyond one's own pre-reflective attitude and what drives the process of listening to others without trying to appropriate their points of view to one's own. Iris Marion Young argued that wonder constitutes an integral part of Arendt's model of judgment (I.M. Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," pp. 220–225). Working with his own Kierkegaard-inspired concept of wonder as the positive anxiety of considering things, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer has shown, in turn, that wonder "works in a similar way to the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*" (J. Bendik-Keymer, "The Other Species Capability & The Power of Wonder," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 22 [3] (2021), p. 161, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2020.1869191).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Arendt's concept of freedom as non-sovereignty (H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition, Chicago–London 1998 [1958], pp. 234–235). In other words, seen in connection to reflective judgment, wonder is neither objectifying (I.M. Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," p. 222) nor self-effacing (Bonnie Mann expressed such worry in her paper, "Feminist Phenomenology and the Politics of Wonder," *Avant* IX [2] (2018), pp. 43–61, doi: 10.26913/avant.2018.02.03). Through wonder, we refer to differences actively. On the one hand, we treat the differences of others seriously, as points of view to be taken into account rather merely being celebrated for their otherness. On the other hand, we do not renounce our own difference but rather come to embrace it. Wonder allows me to appreciate the diversity of others without disclaiming myself.

<sup>35</sup> H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, pp. 64–66. Cf. also H. Arendt, *Denktagebuch, 1950–1970*, U. Ludz, I. Nordmann (eds.), München–Berlin 2020, p. 636.

comment is perceptive. As a sensual faculty, taste involves the literal incorporation of something external to us while also being inherently discriminating about it. We taste the food and decide whether we find it good good-tasting. These features of the sense of taste have inspired Arendt's recent commentators to interpret the judgment of taste as the activity through which individual bodies position themselves vis-à-vis other bodies and assess their relationships with them. For them, the judgment of taste emerges as "a constitutive moment of corporeal subjectivity" that "helps create the borders of an embodied self."<sup>36</sup>

In this reading, the judgment of taste is construed as an embodied faculty. Whatever judgments are specifically about, they are also, fundamentally, the modes of experiencing and expressing one's embodied agency. Here, the connection between preferences and agency begins to emerge, and considering the thyroid can be helpful again. The thyroid displays the body's ability to be an active agent as the body that they are, that is the capacity to use that which is given to go beyond these very immediate circumstances. Just as my preferences are unchosen and at the same time allow me to choose, so is my body given for me and enables me to change that which is given.<sup>37</sup>

Merging these two aspects via the concept of the judgment of taste, we can begin to think about the free exercise of embodied agency as crucially involving the act of choosing against the background of that which is unchosen. Recognizing the conditions of the free exercise of my embodied agency starts from acknowledging the specificity of my position. Suppose that I am a female-bodied person of reproductive age, suffering from a thyroid condition. Through the judgment of taste, I decide how I want to locate myself in the network of bodies, given the body that I am and whatever I need to function as this specific body. I start from the factuality ("that which is as it is") of my own body and make a claim addressed to ("that which is as it is" of) other bodies. In a very general sense, all such claims are made on behalf of my thyroid, i.e. for the sake of my ability to exercise agency as the particular body that I am. I can demand what I need to function as this body (e.g. access to thyroid medications), decide how I want to be or change it (e.g. by using contraception), call out existing injustices in the treatment that my body receives (e.g. the gender inequalities in the vulnerability to harm related to contraception), make alliances with other bodies (e.g. with bodies with thyroid dysfunctions), etc. All of these judgments represent my ability to draw on my body as the source of agency manifest in relating to other bodies—and to do so freely, by choosing how I want to be the body that I am.

At the same time, the relational character of the judgment of taste means that those to which I open myself up to are not just objects to which I respond but also other agents. While my judgment expresses my attitude to, say, the healthcare

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<sup>36</sup> C. Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics With Arendt: How to See Things*, New York 2015, pp. 79–80. Cf. also K. Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics*, Ithaca–London 1999.

<sup>37</sup> These interventions can be far-reaching, including e.g. the change of one's sex/gender. Still, while it is many things, sex/gender transition is also a bodily experience—and a non-universal one, to use Emily Ann Parker's expression (cf. footnote 12).

system (e.g. making a claim to safe medications), it is also a way of relating to others as thyroid-endowed beings, i.e. agents with their own claims (e.g. to their share in healthcare). But how does this relation become a relation, rather than a confrontation?<sup>38</sup> Here, it is worth supplementing the account of wonder presented so far with what is known as the biocentric reading of wonder. This approach has been inspired by Martha Nussbaum's observations on wonder and developed by Jeremy Bendik-Keymer. Thinking within the framework of her capabilities approach, Nussbaum follows "the biologist Aristotle" in arguing "that there is something wonderful and wonder-inspiring in all the complex forms of life in nature."<sup>39</sup> What elicits wonder at both human and non-human beings is, in turn, the realization that all "complex forms of life" strive for their own good, i.e. that they display agency in the general sense of the term.<sup>40</sup> By showing that the wonder-inspiring agency cuts across the human and non-human divide, Nussbaum emphasizes that she understands agency as embodied. Bendik-Keymer develops these intuitions in the context of his own conception of wonder as "the manifestation of positive anxiety in the realm of thinking where we consider sense and meaning amid the free play of possibilities around any given thing."<sup>41</sup> This understanding of wonder allows him to describe it as biocentric, meaning not so much that wonder responds only to living beings as that they are its "special focus."<sup>42</sup> If wonder opens up inquiries about what makes sense to us, it cannot but be moved specifically by how different beings strive for their flourishing.<sup>43</sup> Wonder is inherently sensitive to the new possibilities of sense, including the overall frameworks in which diverse life forms can be said to have a meaningful existence.

Moreover, Bendik-Keymer has argued that wondering at different forms of life helps us appreciate the diversity of human lives.<sup>44</sup> Wonder tends to unsettle apparent certitudes: once we realize that there is nothing obvious about being human (because other forms of life are also worthy of consideration), we begin to appreciate that there is nothing obvious in being human either. Biocentric wonder is thus reflexive in the sense that I have offered in the paper, arguing that, as an attitude complementary to judgment, wonder reflects on the wondering person and results

<sup>38</sup> In her creative involvement with Arendt's philosophy in the series of lectures *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of an Assembly*, Judith Butler goes so far as to suggest that other bodies "dispossess" my own perspective. My very own body takes my body beyond myself to the extent that it is sensually perceived—and in this sense: displaced—by other bodies. For Butler, then, the very fact of being a body results in the simultaneous experience of immanence and transcendence (J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge–London 2015, pp. 76–77. Cf. also *ibidem*, p. 97).

<sup>39</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge–London 2007 (2006), p. 347.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 93–94; M.C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, New York 2000, pp. 72–73; M.C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–New Delhi, pp. 28–30.

<sup>41</sup> J. Bendik-Keymer (with images by M. Morrison), *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder: How the Mind's Original Joy is Revolutionary*, London–New York–Dublin 2023, p. 15. Cf. footnote 34.

<sup>42</sup> J. Bendik-Keymer, "Beneficial Relations Between Species & The Moral Responsibility of Wondering," *Environmental Politics* 31 [2] (2022) [online], doi: 10.1080/09644016.2020.1868818.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>44</sup> J. Bendik-Keymer, "The Reasonableness of Wonder," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18 [3] (2017), pp. 337–355, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2017.1342385.

in their sense of being free. If the judgment is interpreted as an embodied faculty, then it begins by determining one's own position as the particular body that one is (e.g. a female-bodied, thyroid-dysfunctional person in reproductive age). But this cannot be done without considering the diversity of other bodies. Read along the biocentric lines, wonder as the attitude which facilitates familiarization without appropriation helps transform the experience of the transcendence of other bodies into the sense of being free as a body relating to other bodies. It thus performs the task symbolically represented by the thyroid as the body organ that develops the given circumstances into the source of agency.

### Conclusion: Exercising Embodied Agency Freely

Throughout the paper, I have attempted to combine two sets of what could be described as the “unchosen conditions of freedom”<sup>45</sup>: my own body and the materiality of other bodies (including human bodies) with whom I share the world. The free exercise of my embodied agency consists in my making decisions about how I want to be the specific body that I am while relating to other bodies. Knowing that there are other, non-female (and differently female) and non-thyroid-dysfunctional bodies enables me to appreciate better what it means for me to strive as a female, thyroid-dysfunctional body. But at the same time, as I realize that there are many ways of being a human body, I discover many ways of addressing these bodily differences as well. Freely exercising embodied agency consists in making decisions about how I want to live my own unchosen bodily difference. These decisions pertain to my own body (and can concern, e.g., the medications that I use) and to the world that I share and create with others (and can concern, e.g., the organization of the public healthcare system).

I have treated the thyroid as the bodily organ that represents the transformation of the given, the fact of being conditioned (by one's own body and the factors that affect it), into the ability to act (including acting freely). I have developed this idea by offering an account of wonder, interpreted in connection with reflective judgment. As the attitude that generates familiarization without appropriation, wonder moves between the transcendence of others—appreciating the irreducible diversity of their embodied striving—and the immanence of one's body. The oscillation between these two vectors generates the sense of freedom linked to recognizing the right to act as the one specific body, among many others, that one is. This experience of freedom is thus not only reconciled with but also follows from the sense of non-sovereignty. The realization that I cannot appropriate—i.e. fully control others—helps me appreciate my own body, which I do not control entirely either, as not just a source of vulnerability but also the foundation of my freedom. As Judith Butler writes in her interpretation of Arendt's political philosophy, “in being free, we affirm something about what is unchosen for us.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 112.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

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