

**Karen Robertson** (Trent University, Canada)  
e-mail: [karenrobertson@trentu.ca](mailto:karenrobertson@trentu.ca)

***The Example of Socrates: On Error and Community  
in Arendt's Transformative Hermeneutics***

**Abstract**

According to Hannah Arendt, meaningful life involves a “space of appearance” in which to emerge as uniquely significant individuals in the context of other equally singular beings. Such appearance involves a kind of hermeneutical depth—a sharing of terms, of a cultural and historical knowledge of narratives and figures, according to which we appear to understand, and judge, ourselves and others. Our dependence on such terms renders us vulnerable because, without them, we may find ourselves in error about the significance of choices and actions. I explore this possibility of error in the context of Hannah Arendt’s accounts of judgment and appearance, and link our tendency towards errors in judgment to the character of the communities in which we are involved. Specifically, I look to how our ability to judge rightly about what is significant depends, following Immanuel Kant, on the availability of shared examples such that their “exemplary validity” can operate in our recognition of the quality and significance of actions. To develop an understanding of the role of exemplary validity in our capacity for judgment, I turn to Arendt’s account of the “exemplary” figure of Socrates and, weighing her claims against my own reading of Plato’s Socratic Dialogues, the *Apology*, *Theatetus*, and *Meno*, argue that it is precisely this capacity for self-correction and transformation that concerns Arendt; through a judgement of taste, we become able to see the reality of new possibilities through a new “hermeneutical framework” in which to share and through which to approach and assess ourselves and others.