

Political Action and the Standpoint of the Judging Spectator in Hannah Arendt

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In this essay, I reflect on Hannah Arendt's argument that in order to judge political events, one must occupy the retrospective and detached standpoint of the spectator. This claim contrasts with her some of her earlier thinking on judgment and produces at least two troubling consequences. First, it requires that, in order to understand political events, one must remain uninvolved in political action. Second, it implies those who participate directly in politics may never grasp its significance. This reflects important tensions in Arendt's later works – both between theory and practice and between the individual and the other – and, for this reason, strikes me as reason to revisit her discussions of judgement in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy (The Kant Lectures)* and its antecedents in *The Life of the Mind*.

Motivated by these concerns, my paper asks whether the theory of judgment that Arendt describes in *The Kant Lectures* was a necessary consequence of the philosophy of mind that she was developing near the end of her life. Since Arendt intended for her theory of judgement to serve as the third and final volume of *The Life of the Mind* (though by the end of her life, she had completed only its first two volumes on thinking and willing), we should expect to find a close relationship between the two; but the precise nature of this relationship remains unclear. Moreover, if there is a necessary connection between them, then it remains to be seen as to which aspects of Arendt's philosophy of mind are implicated in the more troubling features of her theory of judgement.

Pursuing this question is, I submit, a notably Arendtian task. Arendt treated the ideas of great thinkers not as fixed Platonic essences to adopt or reject wholesale, but rather as sources of diverse insights that she could liberally interpret to provoke and assist her own thinking (1992, p. 142). I propose to treat Arendt in a similar, although a more cautious, way by illustrating the

potential boundaries of our use of Arendt's late philosophy. Thus, I investigate the extent to which one can make apply the main principles of Arendt's philosophy of mind without committing oneself to the inaction of the theorist and the dependence of the actor on the spectator's detached perspective that we find her theory of judgement.

As an answer to the question, I argue Arendt's view of judgement as a faculty that is unavailable to political actors, though not a necessary consequence of the withdrawal from the world that Arendt claims occurs in all mental activity, follows directly from the Arendtian picture of politics and action as performances intended for a public audience, which is itself a result of her commitment to the primacy of appearance. Thus, I conclude that Arendt's theory of judgment is crucially tied to one of the foundational principles that directs her thinking from start in *The Life of the Mind*, suggesting serious limits on the possibility of separating the two. Toward this end, my essay adopts the following structure. First, I complete this introduction with a further note on Arendt's changing perspective on judgment and the doubts that it naturally raises. Second, I show the possible opening for a politically involved view judgement in Arendt's account of the withdrawal that occurs in mental life, which I claim is not undermined by the publicity or enlarged mentality required for judging. Third, I uncover the obstacles for my project at the foundations of Arendt's phenomenology that seem to me to be intractable. Finally, I end with some remarks on the consequences of this result for future dialogue with Arendt's thought.

Before proceeding further, it should help to contextualize my project as both a development of and a critical response to the account of Arendt's theory of judgement provided by Ronald Beiner, the editor of *The Kant Lectures*, in the interpretive essay he included in the text. Beiner takes Arendt's theory of judgement to have shifted in the last five years of her life,

especially in terms of its connection to politics (Arendt, 1992, p. 109-110, 138-140). In general, Arendt thought of judgement as a faculty that adopts the contents of thinking to bring particular instances under a general rule and discriminate about, for example, beauty and moral rightness. However, whereas Arendt sometimes described judgement, in her writings prior to the 1970s, as a faculty exercised by political actors in their deliberations about what course of action to take, Beiner claims that Arendt retreated from this view in her later works to resolve a tension between the active and the contemplative life. Indeed, it appears that Arendt concludes from her reading of Kant that judgement must be placed primarily within the life of the mind to account for its impartiality and its retrospective orientation. Hence, along with thinking and willing, judging became one of the three foundational mental activities for Arendt, each of which involved a bending back toward the mind and, to some extent, the removal of oneself from the world (1981, p. 92). According to Beiner, this attempt to harmonize judgment with the rest of Arendt's philosophy of mind produced "a strained consistency, achieved at the price of excluding any reference to the [active life]" (1992, p. 139), which might otherwise have supplied the practical relevance that at times seems to be missing from the revised account of judgement.

Although he is partially correct, Beiner goes too far in this assessment. In *The Kant Lectures*, Arendt cautions that we risk misunderstanding Kant's views when "the distinction between the two ways of life, the political (active) way and the philosophical (contemplative) way, is so construed as to render them mutually exclusive" (1992, p. 59-60). Indeed, we will see below that Kant's judging spectators must be engaged with one another in the world in order to judge at all and that the exercise of judgment is essential for creating the public sphere that is necessary for politics to take place. In this way, judging does not stand apart from politics and action.

Still, this does not mean that Kant's spectators are themselves engaged in political action. Arendt makes this abundantly clear: "The inference to be drawn from this early distinction between doing and understanding is obvious: as a spectator you may understand the "truth" of what the spectacle is about' but the price you have to pay is withdrawal from participating in it" (1981, p. 93). This passage conveys why I am comfortable describing Arendt as having a politically uninvolved view of judgement despite the political importance she herself ascribes to the faculty; the label highlights this strong duality between those who act politically and those who understand said actions. Faced with such a view, we might genuinely worry that judging, first, is separated from its subject matter so as to introduce serious risk of error and, second, fails to incorporate the evidence that actors, limited in some ways by their standpoint but advantaged in others, are capable of forming meaningful understandings of the events in which they take part.

### **The Withdrawal in Thinking and Judging**

One of Arendt's main ideas in *The Life of the Mind* is her claim that, in each of our three basic mental activities, we the experience a withdrawal from the world, a disappearance (to varying degrees) into thought and contemplation. Arendt takes this as evidence that only the spectator can exercise judgment:

What all these [mental] activities have in common, however, is the peculiar quiet, absence of any doing or disturbances, the withdrawal from involvement and from the partiality of immediate interests that in one way or another make me part of the real world, a withdrawal referred to earlier...as the condition prerequisite for all judgement. (1981, p. 92)

As such, the issue of withdrawal is a natural first place to look to uncover the extent to which Arendt's uninvolved view of judgment is tied to her philosophy of mind. I will argue that the differences that Arendt illustrates between the experiences of thinking and of judging mean that we should not yet deny the use of judgement to political actors. This is because judging removes us not from the world per se but, only briefly, from action.

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt states that “the withdrawal of judgement to the spectator's standpoint...is clearly located within our ordinary world, the reflexivity of the faculty notwithstanding” (1981, p. 96-97). Like each of Arendt's foundational mental faculties, judgment occurs through a bending backward toward the self. Moreover, Arendt finds in Kant that, once we have achieved the appropriate distance necessary for impartial judgment, we depend on the imagination to represent objects that are no longer present to provide the contents of our judgments (1992, p. 66-67). So, when judging, we turn inward and engage in an act of second-order reflection. This clarifies the so-called ‘reflexivity’ of judgment but makes its ‘worldliness’ all the more mysterious.

Why, then, does Arendt place the judging spectator “in Olympia, on the ascending rows of theatre or stadium” (1981, p. 97) and not in the intangible realm of thought? First, judgment requires human plurality, whereas thinking forces us into isolation. “I judge as a member of this community and not as a member of a supersensible world” (Arendt, 1992, p. 67). Indeed, Arendt's use of *The Critique of Judgment* as the basis for her interpretation of Kant's political philosophy hinges on the plurality of Kant's spectators (1981, p. 92). For Kant, the critical standards necessary to engage in judgment can only develop through contact with the thinking of others, against which we test our own opinions, making the publicity of judgment both its necessary condition and the standard that ensures its objectivity (Arendt, 1992, p. 40-42).

Furthermore, the act of judging depends on what Kant calls enlarged mentality, the process by which we expand our thought to include the possible opinions of imagined others, which we weigh against each other in forming judgments. By contrast, thinking is described throughout *The Life of the Mind* as an activity that forces the subject into isolation. We lose our sense of the world around us and become lost in thought, and so thinking cannot tolerate the company of others (Arendt, 1981, p. 74-75). If we do slip into thinking when in the presence of another, we nevertheless act as though we were alone.

Second (and closely related), judgement can actualize thought, whereas thinking can never make anything appear. I should clarify that this does not mean that thinking bears no connection to the world of appearance in *The Life of the Mind*; drawing on our experience in the external world, we approach the mind with the expectation that something will *appear* (Arendt, 1981, p. 23-24), and we employ the language of outer experiences to form metaphors that communicate the contents of the mind to others (p. 110). Still, Arendt maintains that the privacy and instability that characterize inner experience prevent anything from truly appearing in the act of thinking. This is due to, one, the importance for Arendt of the presence of others in assuring us of the reality of our experiences and, two, the fact that, in order to constitute an appearance, objects, mental or otherwise, must stand still for long enough to be experienced in the first place (p. 45-46, 50). These principles are also at work in *The Human Condition*, where Arendt argues that we understand ourselves by appearing before others in the light of the public and that our experiences lose their sense of reality in exchange for a degree of intimacy when seen only in the dim light of our private lives (1998, p. 50-51). Judging, in contrast to thinking's inability to make anything appear, "realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is

not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (Arendt, 1981, p. 193). Judgment remains oriented toward the world in employing the otherwise soundless dialogue of thinking in the formation of public judgments.

Thus we see that, on Arendt’s view, the act of judgment requires the presence of others both real (in forming our ability to judge) and imagined (in exercising judgment) and is capable of producing something that can appear publicly (namely, judgements). Thinking differs from judgment on both of these counts.

By contrast [to the radical withdrawal of thinking], neither willing nor judging, though dependent on thought’s preliminary reflections upon their objects, is ever caught up in these reflections; their objects are particulars with an established home in the appearing world, from which the willing or judging mind removes itself only temporarily and with the intention of a later return. (Arendt, 1981, p. 92)

Although Arendt applies the language of withdrawal to judgment, we have now seen that this mainly involves a temporary retreat to a position of abstract impartiality that remains concentrated on worldly events and individuals and returns to full worldly presence with the appearance of a public judgment.

This seems to me to provide the room necessary for the actor exercise judgment. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt treats thinking as a stopping; that is, we “*stop* and think” (1981, p. 4). With this in mind, we see that underneath the famous provocation in *The Human Condition* to “think what we are doing” is the implied instruction to at once *stop* the activities whose meaning, Arendt cautions, we have failed to think (1998, p. 5). Judgment does require this. Arendt contrasts judging with thinking by highlighting that the former, rather becoming absorbed in reflection, involves only a temporary turn toward the mind. Obviously in thinking the mind does

not permanently absent itself either, but we can plainly see the added importance that Arendt places on the limited duration of judgment's withdrawal and its continual aiming toward a return to the world. I submit that, with this evidence in mind, we should understand judgment in Arendt's philosophy as a *pausing* of our worldly activities as opposed to a stopping of them. This seems compatible with action. One need not abandon political involvement altogether if judging merely requires that we pause from our engagements.

Of course, the term 'involvement' for Arendt does not just mean participation but also points to "the partiality of immediate interests" that follow from participating in political action (1981, p. 92). This forces us to engage more closely with publicity and enlarged thought in *The Kant Lectures*. Respectively, these present external and internal criteria for correct judgment that interested political actors might fail to fulfill.

Earlier, we noted Arendt's use of Kant's view that "[p]rivate maxims must be subjected to an examination by which I find out whether I can declare them publicly" (1992, p. 49). We sometimes feel that, in order to achieve our aims in action, we must not disclose our motives. However, if moral judgments ought to be fit for public appearance, then a motive that must be hidden in order for it to succeed amounts to an instance of evil. This apparently raises a problem for political actors engaged in "conspiratorial activities," for example when acting against oppressive governments (p. 60). This concern, however, leaves many counter examples untouched. Arendt herself points to the difference between a secret coup d'état and a revolutionary movement that publicizes its goals wherever possible to amass support. More ordinary means of political action such as protest, lobbying, and debate could pass the test of publicity as well.

The other problem seems to be that a biased actor could not impartially incorporate the possible beliefs and judgments of others into their judgments as Arendt requires in her appeal to Kant's concept of enlarged mentality. Again, the objection seems exaggerated. It is rather implausible, first, that Kant's "satisfaction bordering on enthusiasm" (Arendt, 1992, p. 48) for the French Revolution developed only after he engaged in a perfectly impartial weighing of possible opinions and, second, that the revolutionaries themselves could not have paused and expanded beyond their own thought to evaluate the significance of the events in which they participated. If we respect the evidence of our ordinary experience, it seems more likely that the differential ability of actors and spectators to fulfill aspect of judgement is a matter of degree. Indeed, it seems to vary more between individual persons than it does between whole categories of persons like spectators and actors.

I maintain that none of the factors we have discussed so far deny the exercise of judgment to the actors involved in political events. Judgement must engage with the world for Arendt, and so it consists in a weakened version of the withdrawal common to all mental activities that, on its own, does not conflict with a life of action. Moreover, the publicity and enlarged mentality of judgement, though they introduce complications and limits for the actor, do not remove the possibility we found in judgement's withdrawal.

### **Action as Performance and the Primacy of Appearance**

One naturally wonders, then, why Arendt should have taken such a strong stance on the relationship between acting and judging. Notice, however, that in most of the conclusions that Arendt bases on judgement's withdrawal, she also employs a picture of action as performance: "Historically, this kind of withdrawal from doing is the oldest condition posited for the life of the mind. In its early, original form it rests on the discovery that only the spectator, never the actor,

can know and understand whatever offers itself as a spectacle” (1981, p. 92). Arendt frames this point around the ‘withdrawal from doing,’ but her main argumentative thrust stems from the implication that the actions in question were intended, in the first place, as a performance. This is not merely based on linguistic analysis. Somewhat loosely, one could describe any event with a spectator as a spectacle, but it does not follow from this that only the spectator can understand such events. We cannot dismiss this as an overly ambitious use of the metaphor either. Arendt would seem guilty of this, for instance, if we isolated passages where she emphasizes “the simple fact that one onlooker can behold many actors, who together offer the spectacle that unfolds before his eyes” (1992, p. 59). If taken as merely playing on the image of the theatre play that terms like ‘actor’ and ‘spectator’ imply, sections like these we would seem to take an analogy farther than anyone would find plausible. We should, therefore, assume that Arendt is doing something more substantial.

This assumption is shown to be justified upon considering the following excerpt from *The Life of the Mind*, which Arendt repeats almost verbatim in *The Kant Lectures* as a clear signal of its significance:

[First:] The actor, being part of the whole, must enact his part; not only is he a “part” by definition, he is bound to the particular that finds its ultimate meaning and the justification of its existence solely as a constituent of a whole. Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game...is not only a condition for judging...but also the condition for understanding the meaning of the play. Second: what the actor is concerned with is...fame and opinion, for it is through the opinion of the audience and the judge that fame comes about. It is decisive for the actor, but not for the spectator, how he appears to others; he depends on the spectator’s it-seems-to-me...he

must conduct himself in accordance with what spectators expect of him, and the final verdict of success or failure is in their hands. (Arendt, 1981, p. 93-94)

This passage shows how seriously Arendt takes her description of action, in politics and elsewhere, as a performance intended for an audience of perceiving and judging subjects; hence, I have quoted it almost in full. We see in this passage that, for Arendt, the events subject to judgment are performed by a group of actors for the sake of an audience in whom they wish to arouse a particular reaction. The actors are ‘partial,’ not only because of their biases, but because they cannot stand outside of the whole in which their purpose is to play a single ‘part.’ They cannot access the meaning of the performance from their standpoint, not only because the whole is only visible to the audience, but because the actions in question do not have their reactions in mind. Instead, the performance targets the judgment of the uninvolved spectator. The spectator’s perspective is decisive because it fixes the meaning of actions through judgment but does not depend for itself on such recognition. Thus: “We...are inclined to think that in order to judge a spectacle you must first have the spectacle – that the spectator is secondary to the actor; we tend to forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it” (Arendt, 1992, p. 61-62).

Arguably, much of Arendt’s political philosophy adopts this picture, frequently appealing to the value placed on new and heroic actions worthy of public glorification in Ancient Greek politics. Hence, we see Arendt’s deep respect for the Athenian *polis* in her treatise on modernity and the active life, *The Human Condition*. In that text, Arendt poses her critique of the collapse of modern politics and the public realm by contrasting it with the *polis* and its emphasis on speech, action, and immortality, which provided a space in which citizens could distinguish themselves and receive the recognition of their equals (1998, p. 196-199). More than mere

benefits enjoyed as a result of acting in public, Arendt repeatedly states that these are the fundamental purposes of action. In acting, we begin something new in the company of others to overcome the isolation and futility of a life lived in private that will not be remembered (p. 176).

With this picture in mind, the objections to politically involved judgment that we were able to resolve when viewing judgment only in relation to the withdrawal in mental activity now return in full force. I therefore turn to the underlying origins of this picture, without which we could easily dismiss this as an implausible generalization of the purpose of our actions. I will argue that this view of politics and action has deep roots in the starting point of Arendt's phenomenology, which begins from the premise of the "primacy of appearance" (1981, p. 22). In the first pages of the main text of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt, in response to what looks like a radically subjective description of experience understood entirely in terms of 'seeming,' makes an epistemological move that solidifies the priority of the perceiving spectator over the acting, appearing subject.

Arendt's first major assertion in this section is that we live in a world of appearance.

The world men are born into contains many things...all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant...to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs. Nothing could appear, the word "appearance" would make no sense, if recipients of appearances did not exist. (Arendt, 1981, p. 19)

These recipients acknowledge and judge "what is not merely there but appears to them and is meant for their perception" (p. 19). As before, Arendt is not merely arguing that 'appearance' implies a perceiver in the way that 'spectacle' implies a spectator; it would be completely uninformative to state that if x appears, then there exists a y such that x appears to y. No, Arendt

is once again pushing for a deeper relationship between the concepts in question. That which appears is *meant* to be perceived.

This passage prepares Arendt's rejection of Cartesian skepticism by almost immediately placing the subject in community with others. Arendt adds that the subject, the perceiver of appearances, is itself an appearing object and that it must be the case, therefore, that there exist other perceivers to whom the subject appears. (1981, p. 19-20). With her teleological conception of the relationship between appearance and perceiver, Arendt feels confident saying that this act of perceiving is what guarantees the reality of appearances and that it is therefore crucial that one engage in self-display, "which answers the fact of one's own appearingness" (p. 21). Hence, Arendt maintains, against Descartes, that without the company of others we could not even be sure of our own existence.

Notice, however, how Arendt implies that, more than just recognizing it, the perceiver fixes the existence of the appearance. I have already cited an example from *The Human Condition* in which individuals lacking the opportunity to appear in the public realm suffer the loss of their reality. Arendt believes that, in such a condition, one ceases to exist in some sense (1998, p. 176). Hence, perceiving is not merely epistemically but also ontologically significant; in a world where everything shares the property of appearing, where that which appears is meant to be perceived, and, thus, where appearing beings must display themselves before others to 'answer the fact of their own appearingness,' that which goes without the recognition of a perceiving subject fails to actualize its existence. This is structurally identical to the situation of the actor and the judging spectator. Earlier, we saw how, for Arendt, the actor cannot assess the meaning of the events she engages in because her actions, to begin with, were meant for the judgment of public spectators. It is now apparent that, independent of the conscious intentions of

the actor, her action is meant for the spectator because we always act in the world, and that everything in a world of appearances is meant to be perceived. Although we may doubt any number of these inferences from Arendt, their place at the foundation of her work in *The Life of the Mind* demands that we take them seriously if we are concerned with a possible application of Arendtian thought.

To complete this connection, I will give a final illustrative example, taken from Arendt's treatment of Kant's theory of taste near the end of *The Kant Lectures*. Arendt seeks to strengthen her claims about the priority of judgment over action by assessing the relationship between the artistic genius responsible for producing beautiful works and the critical taste of those who recognize and evaluate such beauty (1992, p. 65). From Kant's writings on the topic, Arendt concludes that "[necessary] for the existence of beautiful objects is communicability; the judgement of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers" (p. 63). The claim is that art is produced in anticipation of the evaluations of taste, which brings order to its creation and leads to a product that will be recognized in public as something beautiful. Furthermore, artistic works seek to express a state of mind that is beyond words, and it is only by exercising the faculty of taste that we can, as observers of the artwork, communicate it to each other. Hence, Arendt provides an explicit connection between judgment and the importance of perceivers in a world of appearances. The judging spectator is essential both for the production of beautiful art and for art's ability to communicate. Without judgment, beauty could not appear.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In light of these considerations, there seems to be little room for a reconciliation between judgment and political action in Arendt's late philosophy. At first, we found an opportunity the actor to exercise judgment after considering the withdrawal from involvement in mental activity as well as the publicity and enlarged mentality necessary for judging. However, we found no further evidence for such optimism. On the basis of some of her most important phenomenological commitments, Arendt employs a picture of political action that privileges the spectator as the sole determinant of judgment, a conclusion supported by her reflections on taste in Kant's writings. Reinterpreting these conclusions within an Arendtian framework no longer seems feasible since the so-called primacy of appearance that touches on so many aspects of Arendt's thought implies the priority of the uninvolved spectator. There is little doubting its entanglement in her theory of judgement. We must, therefore, understand Arendt's philosophy of mind and her account of judgment along the lines that she suggests in her reflections on the abandonment of the Greek view of spectatorship in Ancient Rome:

Here, of course, the philosophic relevance of spectatorship is entirely lost – a loss that befell so many Greek notions when they fell into Roman hands. What is lost is not only the spectator's privilege of judging, as we found it in Kant, and the fundamental contrast between thinking and doing, but also the even more fundamental insight that whatever appears is there to be seen, that the very concept of appearance demands a spectator, and that therefore to see and behold are activities of the highest rank. (1981, p. 140)

## References

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