

Hannah Arendt as Peter Pan

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Hannah Arendt was a classical republican. What is classical republicanism, and what makes Arendt's version unique?

Classical republicanism is a premodern political ideology which holds that citizens, when faced with a conflict, should aim to resolve it in a way that fulfills their “common good”. This is different from most modern democratic ideologies, since they are concerned instead with what is sometimes called the “public interest” (or the interests of multiple publics in the case of pluralist democrats). “Interest” can suggest a strictly instrumental attitude towards the state to which people give their consent: the state is viewed as being no more than a tool separate from those who use it. And “public” implies that the users are situated within civil society, a domain that is distinct from the state and did not exist in premodern times. By contrast, the citizens of a classic republic are primarily interested in what happens in and around the assembly, since their chief concern is with politics. And this politics is not merely an instrumental affair, since those citizens feel, or ought to feel, what Montesquieu famously called a “love” for their republic. Indeed, to most classical republicans, politics is the only truly worthwhile way of life.

So it should come as no surprise that classical republicans tend to award absolute priority to the citizenry's common good. Often, they express this with the claim that the common good's unity, and so that of the polity embodying it, should be protected at all costs: the moment some citizens begin to be overly concerned with their personal interests, or those of the group to which they belong, then they should be considered corrupt. And at such times there will be a need, as the author of *The Prince* might have put it, for “amputating” the rot.

In the best case, however, no such violence will be required; citizens will consistently affirm their common good and their republic will remain free. But what, exactly, is meant by freedom here? To answer, I want to construct something of an ideal-type classical republicanism by

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describing the two groups of values that are contained within its conception of the common good. One is heroic, its chief aim being glory, and the other is civic, its chief aim being honour.

The hero is the individual who, in politics, fulfils that central Homeric motto “always to be the bravest and best and excel over others.” He does so by performing acts of such grandeur that he will be remembered, glorified by his community such that he becomes, in a sense, immortal. Of course for his actions and their later veneration to be possible, they must take place outside the privacy of the household, in front of the whole political community. Accordingly, those classical republicans who stress heroism also recognize its reliance on civicism, on the community. Because an individual’s words or deeds can only be considered great given their influence upon many people; there can be no glory without a judging community to do the glorifying. Hence the duality of the ancient Greek word *doxa*, which means both “fame” and “opinion.”

Those classical republicans who favour the civic parts of the common good go further, however. For one thing, they tend to conceive of laws as more than the struts that support the stage upon which great individuals may act – they consider the very process of legislating, in which equal citizens come together to deliberate and debate, as intrinsically good. Note that this is not the kind of equality which became popular in modernity, since it does not accrue to people simply by virtue of their being human; on the contrary, it supports an attitude of respect which is owed to citizens who rule and are ruled in turn, that is, who participate in politics and so help determine the laws that reflect their common good.¹ Good laws, then, are essential to an honourable political community, which is the opposite of a corrupt one since its citizens will identify with those laws and willingly put the common good they express ahead of their personal or group interests.

For an analogy of classical republican practice, one that encompasses both of these facets of its common good, think of the game known as hacky sack. In it, players stand in a closed circle and use their feet (and sometimes other body parts, but never their hands) to ensure that a footbag remains aloft. Each time a player receives it, he or she has a choice: either to attempt a trick, or simply to pass it along to another player in the circle. The circle, then, is much like the arena of classical republican politics: attempting a trick reflects something of the hero striving for glory, while merely passing the footbag along fulfils something like the civic ethic.

¹ So these two forms of equality can be associated with the two kinds of respect identified by Stephan L. Darwall, namely “recognition respect” and “appraisal respect,” respectively. See his “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (Oct. 1977): 36–49.

The analogy serves to bring out a tension which lies at the heart of the classical republican endeavour, one to which many classical republicans have been sensitive. It arises from a potential conflict that is consistently present: between ensuring the continuance of the game, on the one hand, or risking a break in the circle's integrity by attempting a difficult stunt, on the other. If a player loses control and allows the footbag to hit the ground, play must be suspended until someone can pick it up again; the "liberty" of their "republic" is, for the time being, no more. And just as these two activities can not only complement but also counter each other, many classical republicans have remarked upon the dangers associated with the ambitious glory-seeker who willingly risks undermining the civic order. He is one reason that they tend to emphasize the fragility of their republics, those rare "Machiavellian moments" when islands of political liberty have arisen from the chaotic waters of history.² Indeed, Aristotle goes so far as to banish the hero from his ideal republic in favour of a strictly civic classical republicanism (*Politics* 1253a28–30).

Not so Arendt, whose classical republicanism is thoroughly heroic. To her, laws are no more than the instruments necessary for sustaining the realm of politics, that "space of appearance" where individuals may perform the glorious words and deeds that are its point.³ Arendt, moreover, affirms these great actions in a way that allows her to avoid an issue that besets more traditional classical republicans. It arises from their tendency to conceive of glory as something which requires the defeat of an adversary, someone or something that poses a threat to the common good.⁴ The virtuous citizen thus needs to be tough, since engaging in a struggle always brings with it the risk that one could end up as an infamous loser rather than a glorified winner. Of course that is just what it means to contend with an adversary: one side can only win if the other loses.

But there is not enough room for adversaries within a republic that is unified around a common good. The reason is simple: if every citizen must consistently uphold the common good, then none may strive to do harm to another or provoke the kind of conflict that might bring victory for some

² See Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, 2nd ed.).

³ See Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 2nd ed.), pp. 63–64; and "What Is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006, rev. ed.), pp. 147, 168–69.

⁴ See my *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics: Putting Practice First* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 132–39, 145–49, which contains a more elaborate version of the account of classical republicanism presented here. (In fact, this essay can be read as picking up from where p. 252 n. 53 of that book left off.)

and defeat for others. Citizens may certainly *oppose* each other, but they must do so as friends, never as adversaries.⁵ They may disagree about what their common good requires, but they cannot uphold values which stand apart from it in any way. Perhaps, then, they should strive to achieve glory by doing battle with foreigners? Yet that is war not politics. Classical republicans thus seem to be confronted with a difficult question: who is there to overcome in order to achieve greatness?

Arendt, however, has no need to answer, since she does not conceive of glory as coming from the defeat of an adversary. Instead, she sees it as arising from creative originality, in particular, as exemplified by those who accomplish great acts rather than produce artworks. Hence the central importance of “natality”, the birth of something new, to her conception of action.⁶ She derives the idea from Augustine, and yet she transforms it in a way that allows her to place much greater emphasis than he did on newness and originality.

As Arendt interprets Augustine, we should aim to transcend mundane, historical time either forward to an anticipated, absolute future that is beyond time, or backward by virtue of a recollecting “return to oneself” that moves from one’s mortal existence to its immortal source, the Creator who determined one’s being.⁷ Both are equivalent because eternal, which suggests that there is not a lot of room for originality here. Arendt’s Augustine can nevertheless be said to affirm what I would call a “revelatory” form of creativity, one which achieves the openness to inspiration that all creativity requires by virtue of a process that, paradoxically, combines both unity and plurality.⁸ Here’s how. Augustine resists the monism of his philosophical inheritance, whether Stoic or Neoplatonic, when he ascribes oneness to the transcendent Creator of the world rather than to the world itself – indeed, as we’ve just seen, it is *through* the world as a historical plurality that we must move in order to reach Him. We must because, to Augustine, God is not only present in the world but, more importantly, He dwells deep inside each of us, such that we can be “true to

⁵ See my “Opponents vs. Adversaries in Plato’s *Phaedo*,” in *Patriotic Elaborations: Essays in Practical Philosophy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009).

⁶ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 176–78.

⁷ See Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, eds. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 27, 50–51.

⁸ I have described how this form of creativity is central to both Rabbinic Judaism and High Modernism in “On the Minimal Global Ethic,” in *Patriotic Elaborations*, pp. 163–80. Arendt suggests that Augustine has a place for human creativity when she writes of how, to him, “it was for the sake of *novitas*, in a sense, that man was created. Since man can know, be conscious of, and remember his ‘beginning’ or his origin, he is able to act as a beginner and enact the story of mankind.” *Love and Saint Augustine*, p. 55.

ourselves,” as we say today, only by coming into contact with the Creator within.⁹ As Arendt describes, this process requires bringing the One and the Many together, since if someone is truly to say “I am,” he must “summon up his own unity and identity and pit it against the variety and multiplicity of the world.”¹⁰

Though Arendt’s own idea of creativity is, as I said, much more radical, it also draws on a paradoxical “pluramonic” metaphysics.¹¹ We see this in her account of the public space in which great political acts are manifested: it is both unified and plural by virtue of being bounded by a wall “that simultaneously gathers [people] into it and separates them from one another.”¹² In contrast to the “undivided unity” of the family, then, Arendt’s political community presumably forms a divided unity, one which both avoids the antipolitics entailed by “the unitedness of many into one” and facilitates the paradoxical politics that “concerns more than the many, namely strictly speaking the sum total of all citizens.”¹³ Or, as she describes this politics elsewhere, it assumes that “one and the same topic...despite its oneness, appears in a great diversity of views.”¹⁴ For “human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings” and “we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”¹⁵

The reason Arendt wants to exclude the production of artworks from this creativity is that she shares with Aristotle the belief that there can be no true freedom in making (*poiesis*) because its end is external, situated in what is made rather than in the maker. This is why, while she admits

⁹ See, for example, Augustine, *Of True Religion* xxxix.72.

¹⁰ Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, p. 24.

¹¹ Arendt, incidentally, refers to creative words and deeds as “revelatory” or a “miracle” in *The Human Condition*, pp. 178, 180, 182, 192, 247.

¹² Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 106; she also says that it both “relates and separates” people in *The Human Condition*, p. 52.

¹³ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” p. 171; *The Human Condition*, p. 214; and *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), p. 280

¹⁴ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” pp. 167–68.

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 176, 8. So we can understand why Bernard Crick was unable to answer the question he posed for himself: “Arendt: Hedgehog or Fox?” in *Essays on Politics and Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), esp. p. 77. For more on the importance of paradox to Arendt, see Munsya Molomb’Ebebe, *Le paradoxe comme fondement et horizon du politique chez Hannah Arendt* (Paris: De Boeck Supérieur, 1998); and Steve Buckler’s discussion of the effects of her fragmenting “modulation narrative” on the unified, because theoretical, voice in *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

that there is an element of freedom present in the creative arts, she complains that its processes are unlike its products in that they remain hidden from the world – and if they do not appear then they do not matter.¹⁶ We change the world outside of us because we have to, given our needs as living beings, whereas when we truly act (*praxis*) we change ourselves, and this process is essentially public. Political action thus constitutes the good life, which should be contrasted with mere life just because its ends are internal, allowing us to act for its own sake and so freely. Arendt, in consequence, does her utmost to maintain this sharp distinction between making and acting. Hence her decision to keep work and labour, the production of durable and consumable things, respectively, limited to the private sphere of the household, and so separate from creative political activity.¹⁷

However, the assumption that making is utterly different from acting is simply wrong. Hegel and Marx, following Adam Smith, have shown that both are dialectical: making, and not only acting, can have an effect on the agent, and acting can produce outcomes which cannot be restricted to the agent.¹⁸ Just think of that everyday expression “to make a move,” which brings out the necessary fuzziness of any line we might wish to draw between the two concepts. Arendt ignores this and, by doing so, she aestheticizes politics. Let me explain.

It seems to me that there are three dimensions of existence: “the practical,” “the natural,” and “the aesthetic.” The practical is realized whenever we strive to fulfil our interests, which is simply another name for our practical values or goods. These interests can be associated with the routines of work, labour, and the family, or they can come into conflict and, when they do, we can respond with either dialogue or force. It is when we do the former that, I would say, we engage in ethics, whether personal or political, whereas when we do the latter it is necessary, ultimately, to talk of war. Accordingly, I define politics as a dialogical, largely practical activity.

By contrast, when we are, say, overcome by hunger then our biological drives or instincts take hold and we are encouraged to realize mere life, that is, to act naturally rather than practically. Moreover, we also leave the practical behind whenever we take on what Kant and Schiller,

¹⁶ See Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” p. 154.

¹⁷ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, chs. 2–3.

¹⁸ See Guy Planty-Bonjour, “Hegel’s Concept of Action as Unity of Poiesis and Praxis,” in Lawrence S. Stepelevicht and David Lamb, eds., *Hegel’s Philosophy of Action* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983).

following Karl Philipp Moritz, called a “disinterested” stance, since that is when the aesthetic comes to the fore.¹⁹ It does so according to four partly overlapping modes: savouring beauty, having fun, fantasizing, or putting on shows, that is, spectacles. These are not practical because they consist of, respectively, tasting, playing, imagining, or exhibiting not to serve some purpose but for their own sakes.

So we can see why Arendt conceives of politics at its best as an aesthetic rather than practical activity. If political action is to be truly free, she says, it “must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other.” Because an action ought to be guided by what she calls a principle, and a principle is something that “becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself.”²⁰ The action, in other words, must point to nothing beyond the act, and as we have noted this is simply a way of saying that it must be carried out for its own sake. Moreover, as I read Arendt, we act in politics according to three of the four aesthetic modes. There is amusing play, since as all who participate in “the game of politics” know, “acting is fun.”²¹ There is show, which is why “words and deeds...are in need of some public space where they can appear and be seen; they can fulfill their own being, which is appearance, only in a world which is common to all.” And there is savouring, which is what spectators do when they appreciate political actions – or at least those actions that deserve to become immortal, since “the fleeting greatness of word and deed can endure in the world to the extent that beauty is bestowed upon it. Without the beauty, that is, the radiant glory in which potential immortality is made manifest in the human world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure.”²²

¹⁹ See Moritz, “An Attempt to Unify All the Fine Arts and Sciences under the Concept of *That Which Is Complete in Itself* (1785),” trans. Elliott Schreiber, *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 97–100; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1790]), 5:203–10; and Schiller, “Fifteenth Letter,” in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004 [1794]).

²⁰ Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” pp. 151–52; see also *The Human Condition*, p. 206, and *The Life of the Mind*, p. 131.

²¹ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1972), p. 203.

²² Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Political Significance,” in *Between Past and Future*, p. 215; see also *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For more on Arendt’s aestheticization of politics, see Dana R. Villa, “Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (May 1992): 274–308; Kimberley Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); and George

The only mode of the aesthetic that Arendt appears to reject is that of fantasizing. True, she acknowledges that the imagination can help with judging, genuine thinking (though, following Kant, she seems to conceive of this as associated with what I call savouring – or its opposite, the sense of displeasure which attends negative discernments). But when the imagination is allowed to run free, and not merely because, as Kant would say, the faculty of understanding has been unable to produce an adequate concept for identifying the thing before it, but because one’s aim is to portray fanciful things in the mind, untethered to reality, then we call this fantasizing. And Arendt goes out of her way to emphasize how it can serve as a source of poisonous fictions, of destructive and fantastical ideologies such as Nazism.²³

Of course, Arendt would distinguish the playing and showing of her political actors and the savouring or displeasure of her political spectators from more mundane forms of these activities. To her, it is only when they are concerned with politics that they can truly be performed for their own sakes – only then can they constitute acts of genuine leisure (*scholē*), when we have been “liberated from domination by life’s necessities.” Otherwise, they serve no more than the goal of rest, “the restoration of the human labor force charged with taking care of life’s necessities.” Instead of leisure time, then, such acts do no more than fill “vacant time.”²⁴

Consider Arendt’s account of the petty pleasures that have supposedly come to charm the French. It is so acerbic that it’s worth quoting at length:

Modern enchantment with ‘small things’, though preached by early twentieth-century poetry in almost all European tongues, has found its classical presentation in the *petit bonheur* of

Kateb, “The Judgment of Arendt,” in Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky, eds., *Judgment, Imagination, Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

²³ See Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Random House, 1994), pp. 322–32; *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 42–44; “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future*, p. 237; and George Kateb, “Fiction as Poison,” in Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz, and Thomas Keenan, eds., *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). Arendt also describes the imagination as taking a non-ideological form of fantasizing in the case of those responsible for American foreign policy during the Vietnam War: “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” in *Crises of the Republic*.

²⁴ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” p. 117; *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1978), p. 93; “The Crisis in Culture,” p. 202; and see also “Tradition in the Modern Age,” in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 18–19. Aristotle could be said to agree, since he would regard the four modes of the aesthetic as no more than forms of “amusement,” which “would seem to be relaxation, and it is because we cannot toil continuously that we require relaxation.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999, 2nd ed.), 1176b33–36.

the French people. Since the decay of their once great and glorious public realm, the French have become masters in the art of being happy among ‘small things’, within the space of their own four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot, extending to these things a care and tenderness which, in a world where rapid industrialization constantly kills off the things of yesterday to produce today’s objects, may even appear to be the world’s last, purely humane corner. This enlargement of the private, the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public, does not constitute a public realm, but, on the contrary, means only that the public realm has almost completely receded, so that greatness has given way to charm everywhere; for while the public realm may be great, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbour the irrelevant.²⁵

Or consider Arendt’s invocation of Heidegger’s critique of the inauthentic gossiping public, of the amused “mere talk” or “incomprehensible triviality” of “the they.”²⁶ (Kierkegaard had previously made the same complaint: “That sluggish crowd which understands nothing itself and is unwilling to do anything, that gallery-public, now seeks to be entertained and indulges in the notion that everything anyone does is done so that it may have something to gossip about.”²⁷) Consider, as well, Arendt’s objection to those who approach artworks not as objects capable of “arresting our attention and moving us” but merely in order to be entertained by them; such art-lovers are even worse than the “educated philistines” for whom art fulfils the practical purpose of edification, which to her amounts to no more than instrumentalization and so commodification.²⁸ Finally, consider Arendt’s claim that, because the actors or virtuosi of stage and screen are, unlike political actors, judged by overly contemporary standards, they have no choice but to “renounce immortality,” which accounts for why they are “forever frustrated and require hysterical outlets.”²⁹

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 52.

²⁶ Arendt, “Preface” to *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993 [1968]), p. ix.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, “The Present Age,” in *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review*, eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 94.

²⁸ See Arendt, “Tradition in the Modern Age,” p. 28; see also “The Crisis in Culture,” pp. 200–202.

²⁹ Arendt, “Stefan Zweig: Jews in the World of Yesterday,” in *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kuhn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 323.

To me, however, these and other examples suggest that Arendt is simply being condescending. There is no substantive difference between these various ways of engaging in aesthetics and those of the political actors and spectators whom she praises. Whether or not one feels justified in describing the modes of the aesthetic as leisurely, the fact is that they are all carried out for their own sakes. Arendt just happens to prefer deriving pleasure from politics, or from thinking about politics. Her friend Hans J. Morgenthau clearly recognized this: “As others enjoy playing cards or the horses for their own sake, so Hannah Arendt enjoyed thinking.”³⁰

So politics, to Arendt, is motivated by the enjoyment of the aesthetic rather than by the well-being that is the basic aim of all practical activities (survival is that of living things in the natural world). This leads me to complain about the childishness of her approach. Because children are the quintessential aesthetes – if they could, they would savour beauty, have fun, fantasize, and put on shows virtually all of the time. They truly enter the serious world of the practical only when they grow up. Arendt, then, is like Peter Pan, who remains a child by escaping to the island he calls Neverland, which is nothing more than his version of the aesthetic.³¹ Indeed, as she herself tells us, she not only favours a political arena that looks “like an island”³² but, following a question about where she sits on the conventional political spectrum, she also declares “I am nowhere.”³³

However, wouldn’t Arendt be better compared to the celestial stars in J.M. Barrie’s story instead, since they are spectators whereas Peter Pan is an actor?³⁴ I am thinking of Ronald Beiner’s remark that “Arendt herself did not devote her life to the life of action; her vocation was that of a solitary thinker and observer: someone whose purpose in life was to watch what was going on and

³⁰ Morgenthau, “Hannah Arendt 1906–1975,” *Political Theory* 4, no. 1 (Feb. 1976): 5–8, p. 6. That said, Morgenthau continues: “The analogy is, however, correct only with the important qualification that she did not play games with thoughts but was deadly serious about them.” To which I would reply: if she was, then it must be that she did not really think for its own sake but for the sake of some good, not least that of justice.

³¹ See J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980 [1911]). Given her different gender, however, Arendt would be an example of the ancient archetype that Carl Jung called the *puella aeterna*. On the archetype, see Ann Yeoman, *Now or Neverland: Peter Pan and the Myth of Eternal Youth – A Psychological Perspective on a Cultural Icon* (Toronto, ON: Inner City Books, 1998), p. 16.

³² Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” p. 171; see also *The Human Condition*, pp. xix, 237, 244; and *On Revolution*, pp. 279–80.

³³ Quoted in Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America, from the 1930s to the Present* (New York: Viking, 1983), p. 436.

³⁴ On pp. 24–25, Barrie writes: “Stars are beautiful, but they may not take an active part in anything, they must just look on for ever.”

to reflect on what it meant.”³⁵ And whereas most people would concur with the stars that the inability to act is a kind of punishment, and even resent those who are capable of doing so (the stars, we are told, “are not really friendly to Peter”³⁶), Arendt draws on Kant to argue that acting is subordinate to the judgment of the spectator, since the former is necessarily partial while the latter is impartial because disinterested.³⁷ That said, Kant conceives of disinterested judgement as carried out by a monological, asocial individual, making such a spectator an unsuitable model for political judgment since it must, after all, transpire within a community. Arendt ignores this part of Kant, as we see from her decision to translate Kant’s *allgemein* as “general” rather than “universal.”³⁸ Moreover, even when political judgment is seen as necessarily situated within a community, to conceive of it as disinterested is to imply that it is “neutral” as distinct from “impartial,” since only the latter, I would claim, strives to fulfil the common good as embodying the shared interests of the citizenry.

Be that as it may, I think we ought to recognize how, in the end, Arendt was not just a spectator but also an actor. For it is hard to believe that she truly wished for the ideas she formulated and presented to the world, through her numerous books and articles, to have no influence at all on political practice. One can imagine her objecting that publishing ideas is one thing (a form of work) and thinking them up another,³⁹ but surely the former is also a case of what she would call speech, hence of political action.

What could have driven Arendt to Neverland? One possibility has to do with the drudgery that many associate with ordinary life (this certainly accounts for Peter’s aversion to the bourgeois lifestyle of Wendy’s parents). But I think that a very different reason is more probable. It is that an escape to the aesthetic was the only way Arendt knew to continue loving the world despite Auschwitz.

³⁵ Beiner, “Rereading Hannah Arendt’s Kant Lectures,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit: Essays on Contemporary Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 192.

³⁶ Barrie, p. 25.

³⁷ See *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 62–69.

³⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 67, 71; Arendt, “Culture and Politics,” in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), pp. 180–82; and Beiner, “Rereading Hannah Arendt’s Kant Lectures,” pp. 187–92.

³⁹ See Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in Melvyn A. Hill, ed., *Hannah Arendt and the Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), p. 304.

Consider her association of evil with totalitarianism, particularly its inhumane bureaucracy. This allows her to keep the aesthetic as a place apart, and so as a potential home for political liberty as she conceives of it. Thus does she write: “To the extent that the rise of totalitarian governments is the central event of our world, to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all.”⁴⁰ I would say the same of her attempt to naturalize evil by referring to it metaphorically as a fungus, since this is another way of keeping it extra-aesthetic. So, too, is her decision to label it banal, which arose partly from a fear that to call something diabolical risks glamorizing it.⁴¹ There’s an irony here, however. As Gershom Scholem points out, “the banality of evil” – Arendt’s famous subtitle – is no more than “a slogan,” one which exhibits the same tone of “flippancy” that characterizes much of her writing on Adolf Eichmann; the idea, in other words, is itself aesthetic, in contrast to an “in-depth analysis,” which is serious because practical.⁴² The claim about evil’s banality also fails to consider how much the Nazis were themselves engaged in aesthetics, and by this I mean to refer to more than just their parades, architecture, and stylish coats.⁴³ Because we must also appreciate how much they *enjoyed* wielding the power to murder. As Scholem wrote to Arendt:

I don’t picture Eichmann, as he marched around in his SS uniform and relished how everyone shivered in fear before him, as the banal gentleman you now want to persuade us he was,

⁴⁰ Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” p. 308. So I agree with Shiraz Dossa when she writes that Arendt’s conception of politics “is inconceivable without her personal experience. This experience provided the impulse and the substantive thrust of her thinking about political matters. And because her experience was born of political turmoil and because it brought her face to face with human unfreedom and mass murder, she tended to think and write as if politics, human affairs, and freedom were identical phenomena.” Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), p. 13.

⁴¹ See Arendt, “The Eichmann Controversy: A Letter to Gershom Scholem,” in *The Jewish Writings*, pp. 470–71; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1964, rev. ed.); and Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 299–304. To me, however, evil is not merely thought-defying because banal; it is thought-destroying. So I do not agree with Arendt that what she calls “holes of oblivion” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 232) are unrealistic. See my “Good, Bad, Great, Evil,” in *Patriotic Elaborations*, esp. p. 201.

⁴² Scholem, 23 June 1963 letter to Arendt, in *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 396–97. Or as Lionel Abel has put it: “to make moral or political [in contrast to aesthetic] judgments one has to investigate and discuss the actual political and moral alternatives, and this Miss Arendt has not done.” Abel, “The Aesthetics of Evil: Hannah Arendt on Eichmann and the Jews,” *Partisan Review* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1963): 211–30, p. 219.

⁴³ See Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson, 2002).

ironically or not. I refuse to go along. I've read enough descriptions and interviews of Nazi functionaries and their conduct in front of Jews – while the going was good – to mistrust this innocuous *ex post facto* construction. The gentlemen enjoyed their evil, so long as there was something to enjoy. One behaves differently after the party's over, of course.⁴⁴

Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the enjoyment of power, which comes from exercising it for its own sake rather than for that of some good, is a core element of fascism.⁴⁵ In any case, Arendt, I am claiming, is unwilling to acknowledge these aesthetic dimensions of Nazism because this is the only way she can keep it off her island.

Of course, I did not know Arendt, so what I am suggesting is merely a conjecture. Perhaps it only reveals my own preoccupations. Or perhaps it is all too easy for me, as a Canadian, to take this harsh view of her. While she had to face real evil, most of my compatriots have only recently begun to grapple seriously with the possibility that our country's domestic history includes genocide.⁴⁶

Even so, in objecting to Arendt's aestheticism I do not mean to suggest that there should never be room for creativity when it comes to responding to conflict. I simply conceive of it differently than she does. Given that creativity requires inspiration, and inspiration is (at least partly) irrational, I include creativity among the forceful, and so non-dialogical, responses to conflict. To engage in a dialogue is to exchange interpretations, not creations; in the best case, interlocutors strive to make sense of something, to reach a shared understanding of it, not to make something up. And when a dialogue succeeds, the common good will have benefited without being exposed to the risks that necessarily attend any genuinely creative act. This is why "dialogue first" seems to me to constitute the best way to support an authentic, because non-aestheticized, politics – the only truly "grown-up" approach.

⁴⁴ Scholem, 12 August 1963 letter to Arendt, in *Gershom Scholem*, p. 402.

⁴⁵ Not that one must be a fascist to appreciate power in this way. According to Thomas Nagel, for example, "The pleasure of power is not easily acknowledged, but it is one of the most primitive human feelings – probably one with infantile roots. Those who have had it for years sometimes realize its importance only when they have to retire. Despite their grave demeanor, impersonal diction, and limited physical expression, holders of public power are personally involved to an intense degree and probably enjoying it immensely." Nagel, "Ruthlessness in Public Life," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 77.

⁴⁶ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 241; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2004, 2nd ed.), chs. 4–5; and James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina, SK: University of Regina Press, 2013).