

On Hannah Arendt's Aestheticism

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I have a great yearning for a real break from work, though I can't deny that I'm enjoying the Eichmann business.

Arendt, letter to Karl Jaspers¹

Introduction

Should an award ever be given for the strangest statement made by a major political thinker, a strong contender must be something Hannah Arendt said during an academic conference dedicated to her work: "I can very well live without doing anything." Arendt's primary concern, she explained, was understanding the world, not affecting it. She even went on to admit that the few times in her life when she had acted, it was only "because I couldn't help it." For what she really wanted was "to withdraw from the world."²

Yet the statement wasn't new. Years earlier, interviewed by Günter Gaus, Arendt explained that

When I am working, I am not interested in how my work might affect people
What is important to me is the thought process itself. As long as I have succeeded in thinking something through, I am personally quite satisfied. If I then succeed in expressing my thought process adequately in writing, that satisfies me also. You ask about the effects of my work on others. If I may wax ironical, that is a masculine question. Men always want to be terribly influential, but I see that as somewhat external. Do I imagine myself being influential? No. I want to understand. And if

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¹ July/August 1962, in *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926–1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1992), p. 479.

² 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), pp. 303–304.

others understand – in the same sense that I have understood – that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.³

What, then, are we to make of all the praise and blame in Arendt's many books and articles? Do they not defend numerous political commitments, whether as regards totalitarianism and Adolf Eichmann; for or against Zionism; in opposition to self-deception and, most controversially, desegregation in American life – to mention just a few? Did she truly not wish for people to read her work and act upon it? Is she the only political thinker, ever, to not care about politics?

I believe the explanation lies in the fact that Arendt was an aestheticist. Others have also read her in this way, though as we'll see below they respond differently than I do. So I will begin by explaining what I mean by aestheticism, and then I will show the ways in which it plays a major role in her thinking. Finally, I will suggest how all this accounts for her potentially award-winning statement.

Aestheticism

Aestheticism is the doctrine according to which seemingly non-aesthetic things are actually aesthetic, parts of a whole dimension of reality that we might simply call "the aesthetic." Evidently, I think the term should have a much wider meaning than is usually assumed. Normally, when people talk of "aesthetics" they mean to invoke beauty, most often, of artworks. The aesthetic encompasses much more than beautiful art, however. To see why, and so grasp its full scope, we need to take two steps.

The first comes from noting, with Joseph Addison in 1712, that we can look upon not only artworks but "the World, as it were in another Light," leading us to discover "a Multitude of Charms."⁴ Similarly, when Kant and Schiller, following Karl Philipp Moritz, emphasized the

³ Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Günter Gaus (1964)," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 3. Linda M.G. Zerilli has argued that Arendt isn't interested in guiding actions because she wants her judgments to create the space that alters our sense of the common world instead. See Zerilli, "'We Feel Our Freedom': Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (Apr. 2005): 158–88, pp. 178–79; and *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), esp. ch. 1.

⁴ Addison, "Taste and the Pleasures of the Imagination: No. 411, Saturday June 21, 1712," in Addison *et al.*, *The Spectator in Four Volumes: Volume Three*, ed. Gregory Smith (London: Dent, 1945), p. 278.

centrality of disinterestedness to aesthetic experience, they saw it as relevant to “all aesthetic qualities of phenomena and – in a word – what we call *Beauty* in the widest sense of the term.”⁵ This likewise suggests that to appreciate disinterestedly is to savour not only how beautiful art appears to our senses but also the beauty of a lover, a melancholy sunset, a fine bottle of wine, and so on. In fact, we can savour things other than beauty, including artificiality (as in Susan Sontag’s account of “camp”), zaniness (send in the clowns), cuteness (kittens), or catchiness (as when a new tune seizes our attention).⁶

We can also appreciate negative aesthetic qualities that provoke the opposite of savouring. Think of ugly, though great, Modernist artworks, not to mention that pile of dirty dishes in your sink, the yapping dog next door, or the atrocious oil spill off the coast. Moreover, an object can be aesthetically negative in one way but aesthetically positive in another (I often feel this way about industrial architecture, for example). This stands alongside those genuinely mixed cases that give rise to distinct aesthetic qualities such as the uncanny or that awe-inspiring unlimitedness we call the sublime. All these examples suggest that the not-beautiful contrasts with the beautiful within a category that includes both, as Plato noted long ago.⁷

⁵ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004 [1794]), letter 15 (p. 76). See also 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; and Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1790]), 5:203–10. Johann Gottfried Herder would likewise have us extend the domain of beauty to cover “everything that has a pleasurable effect on the soul.” From his “Critical Forests: Fourth Grove, On Reidel’s *Theory of the Beaux Arts* (1769),” in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 205. More recently, Jerome Stolnitz has pointed out that “no object is admitted to or excluded from the realm of the aesthetic because of its inherent nature,” for it is “the attitude of the percipient that is decisive.” Stolnitz, “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness,’” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20, no. 2 (1961): 131–43, p. 142.

⁶ See Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), esp. p. 14; and Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Note that I prefer “catchiness” to Ngai’s “interesting” because her use of the term strikes me as aestheticist – which is to be expected given her claim, on p. 241 of her book, that “aesthetic experience has come to saturate virtually every nook and cranny of the world that postmodern subjects inhabit.” While Ngai is aware that “interesting” can have a practical sense (see pp. 48–52, 112–17), she nevertheless privileges the aesthetic one (see esp. p. 132); I do the opposite.

⁷ See James Applewhite, “Modernism and the Imagination of Ugliness,” *The Sewanee Review* 94, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 418–39; Andrei Pop, “Can Beauty and Ugliness Coexist?” in Pop and Mechtild Widrich, eds., *Ugliness: The Non-Beautiful in Art and Theory* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2014); Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’ (1919),” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey, trans. Anna Freud and Strachey (New York: Vintage, 2001, rev. ed.); James Kirwan, *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2005), ch. 10; and Plato, *Sophist* 257D–E. The idea that aesthetic appreciation can involve many more qualities than the Kantian standards of beauty and sublimity has been particularly well defended

The second step consists of recognizing that, though the term “aesthetic” is rooted etymologically in a certain kind of sense perception (i.e. from the ancient Greek *aisthanomai*, “I perceive”), there are at least three other aesthetic modes, each comprising different forms of disinterestedness that bring their own kind of enjoyment. There is disinterested imagining, as when we fantasize, letting our imaginations “run free,” unrestricted by fact; disinterested presenting, as when we put on an entertaining show or spectacle; and disinterested playing, as when we participate in games that are fun.⁸ All of these run counter to engaging in these activities for practical purposes, as when we taste food to test it rather than savour it; imagine in order to empathize and so better understand someone; present an argument to convince; or play seriously, say because we’ve a role in some scheme, are toying with someone’s emotions in order to manipulate them, or are experimenting in order to invent or repair something.

So the aesthetic is constituted by beings capable of disinterestedness in all of these modes. Another way of putting this is to say that they can experience enjoyment whenever they affirm things for their own sakes. And to do this, I also want to claim, requires treating the things as if they were self-enclosed, unified wholes. Something self-enclosed is atomist, such that one could (metaphorically) draw a solid line around it; and something unified is cohesive, there being no “gaps”⁹ in it. To affirm something for its own sake, then, is to understand it as a unity separate from us because we’re situated outside it; whereas if we were interested in it, some concern or issue has led us to be integrated or interlocked with it in some way. So we couldn’t stand to it as, say, a kitten stands to a ball it’s playing with.¹⁰ In fact, this is just the kind of relation that I think Moritz is getting at with his concept of disinterestedness, since in his essay on the topic he says that he regards a beautiful object “as something that is not complete in me but is rather *complete*

by Frank Sibley in his “Aesthetic Concepts (1959),” in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, eds. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxby Cox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ On fantasy as so understood, see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014 [1817]), ch. 13; on show or spectacle, see Guy Dabord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1994 [1967]), chs. 1–3; and on play, see Karl Groos, *The Play of Man*, trans. Elisabeth L. Baldwin (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1901), pp. 389–95.

⁹ See my “[Gaps: When Not Even Nothing Is There](#),” *Comparative Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (Jan. 2021): 31–55.

¹⁰ See, for example, Gosia Zdziechowska, “[Joyful African wildcat kitten plays with a ball](#),” *Polish Dr Dolittle YouTube video channel*, 24 March 2022.

in itself, that thereby constitutes a totality in itself and accords me pleasure *for its own sake*.”¹¹ Because to say that something is a totality in itself is to say that, as a whole, it is atomist, and to say that it is complete in itself is to say that it has no gaps.

All this leads me to reject the Kantian distinction between disinterestedness and the “for its own sake.” To be disinterested, according to Kant, is to take pleasure “in the mere representation of the object,” not in its existence, while affirming something for its own sake is reserved for that which “is called good in itself,” i.e. “the morally good,” as Kant famously claimed that the rational being is “something the *existence of which in itself* has an absolute worth, something which is *an end in itself*.”¹² It seems to me, however, that valuing something in this way is no less disinterested. Because to be *interested* (from the Latin *inter-* ‘between’ + *esse* ‘be’) in something, whether it be an image or an actual thing, is to be “into it,” as we say, and this means crossing or at least interlinking with the boundary between it and us. Moreover, even to perceive something as distinct requires it to emerge from what followers of Heidegger and Wittgenstein call our “prereflective background,”¹³ and we can be sure that it will have done so in a particularly interesting way if it’s involved in a conflict. That is why Heidegger was so enamoured with the fragment of Heraclitus that reads in part, “struggle [*polemos*] is the father of all things,” though Heidegger’s adoption of the Presocratic’s unity of opposites caused him to miss the disunity implied by this phenomenon.¹⁴

Interest, then, is the attitude constitutive of what we might call “the practical” dimension of reality. Unlike the aesthetic, it is holistic and (often) disunified, and we humans enter it whenever we aim to realize our interests, both moral and material, in order to achieve well-being as distinct from enjoyment. Of course, we also affirm things for our own sakes rather than the things’ sakes when, like other animals, we are *driven* by our instinct for survival, making this when we access “the natural” dimension of reality.

¹¹ Moritz, p. 97.

¹² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:205 (see also 5:217–19), 5:207, 5:209; and “Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals (1785),” 4:428–29, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹³ See, for example, Charles Taylor, “Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Background Practices: Essays on the Understanding of Being*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ See Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 61–63; and *Being and Truth*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 72–75.

To treat things that are essentially practical or natural in a disinterested way is thus to aestheticize them. This, for example, is what the late 19th century Aesthetic movement did with art; they made it and received it not for a practical purpose (edification, say) but for its own sake – *l'art pour l'art*, as their slogan has it. This is also, I claim, what Arendt does with politics.

Politics, to me, is a fundamentally practical – and so serious – activity. It consists of citizens or their representatives responding to conflicts of their interests by engaging in dialogue. If they respond with force instead of dialogue, then they are ultimately involved in war rather than politics. But in the best case, they will aim to reconcile their conflicts through conversation; in the second best, they will negotiate accommodations in good faith. Either way, they participate in these forms of dialogue not for its own sake but for their interests, and this is why politics shouldn't be considered aesthetic. Of course, people may also find politics enjoyable, since both its practice and its practitioners have aesthetic qualities. But enjoying politics is not the point; if it is, then it's been aestheticized.

Among those who also read Arendt as an aestheticist of some kind, I thus object most strongly to those who welcome it in one way or another.¹⁵ But the others leave me dissatisfied as well, since they appear to be no more than ambivalent. Patrick Riley, for example, argues that we should reject Arendt's turn to Kant's aesthetic judgment in favour of seeing his true political philosophy as aiming for the morally valuable ends of universal republicanism and eternal peace, that is, for a world where people of good will respect each other as an end in itself.¹⁶ But this, I've claimed, is in its own way aesthetic. Martin Jay complains that Arendt's proposed aesthetic judgment as a model for politics isn't fully worked out, and he's also troubled by her segregation of the political realm from socioeconomics. Yet her approach remains "promising."¹⁷ Kennan Ferguson advances major criticisms, not least that, despite her talk of plurality, Arendt's politics ends up as monistic

¹⁵ See, for example, 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); Patchen Markell, "Arendt, Aesthetics, and 'The Crisis in Culture'," in Nikolas Kompridis, ed., *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); and Jim Josepson, *Hannah Arendt's Aesthetic Politics: Freedom and the Beautiful* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁶ See Riley, "Hannah Arendt on Kant, Truth and Politics," *Political Studies* 35, no. 3 (Sept. 1987): 379–92.

¹⁷ Jay, "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" *Cultural Critique*, no. 21 (Spring 1992): 41–61, p. 53; and see pp. 54–56.

given its “insistence on the final singularity of an ultimately harmonious public space.”¹⁸ Still, his central complaint is that, ultimately, she’s not aestheticist in the right way. Finally, George Kateb’s account of Arendt’s “politics for the sake of politics” is largely expository, except when he criticizes her sidelining of morality and excessive discounting of empathy. He concludes, however, by suggesting that ordinary politics, not only the kind favoured by Arendt, can be appreciated aesthetically, and he points out that the morality of those Germans who resisted the Nazis despite the risks must have been shored up by a worldly political aestheticism, one that helped them appreciate how the evil they were up against was uniquely new.¹⁹

Arendt’s Classical Republicanism

All this leads me to want to offer an account of Arendt’s aestheticism that shows how it is incompatible with politics as I conceive of it. I begin by acknowledging that Arendt does say that “debate constitutes the very essence of political life.”²⁰ Indeed, she praises the various systems of people’s councils, such as those supported by labour movements, because they enable widespread participation in debate.²¹ Yet she also stipulates that this politics is free only when carried out for its own sake, that is, when it is “free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other.”²² No wonder she came to agree with the Pythagorean parable reported by Diogenes Laertius: “Life . . . is like a festival,”²³ to which she would no doubt add that politics is its highest form. The implication is that political actors and judges, those who perform and those who evaluate the performances, are aesthetic.

¹⁸ Ferguson, *The Politics of Judgment: Aesthetics, Identity, and Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), p. 113; and see pp. 102–13.

¹⁹ 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), p. 122; and see pp. 122, 132–37.

²⁰ Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006, rev. ed.), p. 236.

²¹ See Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 2nd ed.), pp. 215–20; and *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), ch. 6.

²² Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Political Significance,” in *Between Past and Future*, p. 214.

²³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1978), I, p. 93.

Before examining in detail how this implication can be found in Arendt's writings, we need to see how, fundamentally, her ideal politics takes a classical republican form.²⁴ What is classical republicanism, and what makes Arendt's version unique?

Classical republicanism is a political ideology which holds that a citizenry, when faced with a conflict, should aim to resolve it in a way that fulfills its common good.²⁵ This is different from most modern democratic ideologies, which are concerned with the good of "the public" instead (or multiple publics in the case of pluralist democrats). The idea tends to be associated with the sense that the state is no more than the public's tool, and the public is situated strictly within civil society, a domain that stands apart from the state and which did not exist in premodern times. By contrast, the citizens of a classic republic are primarily concerned with their activities in and around the political assembly, and they are concerned in a way that expresses (or ought to) what Montesquieu famously called their "love" for their republic. Indeed, to classical republicans, this love is the basis of the only truly worthwhile form of life.

Thus, classical republicanism tends to give absolute priority to the citizenry's common good. Often, this is expressed along with the claim that the unity of the common good, and that of the polity embodying it, should be protected at all costs: the moment citizens become overly concerned with their personal interests, or those of the groups to which they belong, then they must be considered corrupt. And at such times there is a need, as the author of *The Prince* might have put it, to "amputate" the rot.

In the best case, however, no such violence is required. Citizens consistently affirm their common good, and their republic remains free. But what, exactly, is meant by freedom here? To answer, we might construct an ideal-type classical republicanism by describing the two groups of

²⁴ Others who read her in more or less this way include Patricia Springborg, "Hannah Arendt and the Classical Republican Tradition," in Gisela T. Kaplan and Clive S. Kessler, eds., *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), ch. 4; and Michael H. McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), esp. the introduction and ch. 2.

²⁵ See, for example, Z.S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans: An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1962, 2nd ed.); and Hans Baron, *Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, rev. ed.), though compared with these authors I would more strongly emphasize the difference between classical republicanism (which can equate with "civic humanism") and modern republicanism (which I consider a form of modern democracy). See Mark Hulliung, *From Classical to Modern Republicanism: Reflections on England, Scotland, America and France* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

values contained within its common good. One is heroic, its chief aim being glory, and the other is civic, its chief aim being honour.²⁶

Heroes are individuals who, in politics, fulfil the central Homeric motto to “always to be the bravest and best and excel over others.” They do so by performing acts of such grandeur that they will be remembered, glorified by their community and so become, in a sense, immortal. Often, these acts consist of defeating an adversary, someone or something that poses a threat to the common good. This is why the hero needs to be tough, not to mention courageous, since engaging in a struggle invites the risk of becoming the infamous loser rather than the glorified winner. In fact, that’s just what it means to contend with an adversary: one side can win only if the other loses.

If heroic actions and their veneration are possible, moreover, they must take place outside the privacy of the household, before the whole political community. Classical republicans who stress heroism thus recognize its reliance on civicism, on the community of citizens. An individual’s words or deeds can only be considered great when they contribute to the common good of many people; that’s why there can be no glory without a judging community to do the glorifying, and it’s why the ancient Greek word *doxa* means both “fame” and “opinion.”

Classical republicans who favour the civic parts of the common good tend to go further, however. For one thing, they conceive of laws as more than mere struts supporting the stage upon which great individuals act – they consider the very process of legislating, where equal citizens come together to deliberate and debate, as intrinsically good. Note that this is not the kind of equality which became popular in modern times, since it doesn’t accrue to people simply by virtue of being human; on the contrary, it derives from the respect owed to those who rule and are ruled in turn, that is, who participate in politics and help determine the laws that express their common good.²⁷ 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.

²⁶ 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 where that book left off on p. 252 n. 53).

²⁷ So these two forms of equality can be associated with the two kinds of respect identified by Stephen L. Darwall, namely “recognition respect” and “appraisal respect,” respectively. See his “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (Oct. 1977): 36–49.

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

This analogy helps bring out a tension which lies at the heart of the classical republican endeavour, one to which many of its proponents have been sensitive. It arises from a dilemma that is consistently present: whether to ensure the continuance of the game, on the one hand, or risk breaking 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 is suspended until someone picks it up; the "liberty" of their "republic" is, for the time being, no more. So we can understand why many classical republicans, including Arendt, have warned of the dangers associated with the ambitious glory-seeker, the person who cares too much about winning the competition and so willingly risks undermining the cooperative civic order. It was excessive emphasis on "the extraordinary" in everyday life, writes Arendt, that led to the "swift decline of the city state."²⁸ Because that's what happens to

a polis whose life consisted of an intense and uninterrupted contest of all against all, of *aei aristeuein*, ceaselessly showing oneself to be the best of all. In this agonal spirit, which eventually was to bring the Greek city-states to ruin because it made alliances between them well-nigh impossible and poisoned the domestic life of the citizens with envy and mutual hatred (envy was the national vice of ancient Greece), the commonweal was constantly threatened.²⁹

No wonder classical republicans tend to emphasize the fragility of their republics, those rare "Machiavellian moments" when self-enclosed islands of political liberty have risen above the

²⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 197.

²⁹ Arendt, "Socrates," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 16.

chaotic waters of history.³⁰ Indeed, something like this is why Aristotle went so far as to banish the hero from his ideal republic, favouring a strictly civic classical republicanism (*Pol.* 1253a28–30).

Not so Arendt. While she doesn't neglect the civicism necessary for supporting the "space of appearance" where individuals may perform glorious words and deeds, she also never fails to advocate for their heroism.³¹ She is able to do so, moreover, because her republic is more durable than most. There are two reasons for this. First, there is a sense in which it is already "broken"; and second, this brokenness allows for a different conception of the source of glory. Arendt draws on Augustine for both.

As Arendt interprets Augustine, we should aim to transcend mundane, historical time either forward, to an anticipated absolute future beyond time, or backward, recollecting a "return to oneself" that moves from one's mortal existence to its immortal source, the Creator who determined one's being.³² This makes way for what I would call a "revelatory" form of creativity, one which achieves the openness to inspiration that all creation requires by virtue of a process that, paradoxically, combines unity and plurality.³³ For 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, it is *through* the world as a historical plurality, given the gaps cutting through it, that we must move in order to reach Him. And because He also dwells deep inside each of us, we can be "true to ourselves," as we say today, only by coming into contact with the Creator within (*Of True Religion* XXXIX.72). As Arendt

³⁰ See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, 2nd ed.), pp. viii, 48, 365–66, 545.

³¹ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 63–64; and "What Is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 147, 168–69.

³² See Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, eds. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 27, 50–51.

³³ 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: Essays in Practical Philosophy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009). 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." Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, p. 55; see also "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), p. 321. She also refers to original words and deeds as "revelatory" or "miraculous" in *The Human Condition*, pp. 178, 180, 245; see also pp. 182, 192, 247.

describes this, unity and plurality must be brought together, since if someone is to truly say “I am,” he must “summon up his own unity and identity and pit it against the variety and multiplicity of the world.”³⁴

Arendt herself adopts this paradoxical, “pluramonic” metaphysics (for want of a better term). We see this in her account of the public space where 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.”³⁵ Also, political “power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purposes of action” and yet “action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men.”³⁶ So it is because of her (at least initially) pluralist conception of the citizenry that Arendt’s republic differs from that of monist classical republicans, including Aristotle’s Parmenidean monism and Machiavelli’s Heraclitean monism. This is why, while she conceives of the political arena as “like an island,”³⁷ as Machiavelli does, she diverges from him in welcoming the rivers and streams of *fortuna* that cut through it, since she believes political actors can only truly act by responding to the contingencies of history. Despite (or because of) this, she shares Machiavelli’s playful conception of *virtù*:

Virtù is the response, summoned up by man, to the world, or rather to the constellation of *fortuna* in which the world opens up, presents and offers itself to him, to his *virtù*. There is no *virtù* without *fortuna* and no *fortuna* without *virtù*; the interplay between

³⁴ Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, p. 24.

³⁵ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” in *The Promise of Politics*, p. 106; she also says that the wall both “relates and separates” people in *The Human Condition*, p. 52. On how such walls protect a space of freedom, see *On Revolution*, p. 275.

³⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 175. That by “plurality” she intends to make room for radical difference, which requires more than the merely numerical claim equivalent to “multiplicity,” is evident from Arendt’s assertion “that men, not Man, live on the earth” (*The Human Condition*, p. 7; see also “What Is Freedom?” p. 163). By contrast, when the astronaut Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, he intended to make the strictly numerical claim, only the indefinite article wasn’t audible in the broadcast of his famous declaration: “That’s one small step for *a* man, one giant leap for mankind.” See Marc Carreau, “[High-tech analysis may rewrite space history](#),” *Houston Chronicle*, 29 September 2006.

³⁷ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” p. 171; see also *The Human Condition*, pp. xix, 237, 244; and *On Revolution*, p. 276.

them indicates a harmony between man and world – playing with each other and succeeding together.³⁸

Evidently, Arendt can be counted among the classical republicans for whom the competition for glory is like a game, since if adversaries are to take the form of competitors rather than enemies they must unanimously consent to the competition's rules. This *de facto* monism is, I suggested above, also necessary for disinterest, because one can only play the game for its own sake if it has a sake; if it is pluralist and fragmented it will have many, rival sakes, and that is no fun.

In contrast to the “undivided unity” of the family, then, Arendt’s political community forms what we might describe as a “divided unity,” one which, at least for a time, avoids the antipolitics entailed by “the unitedness of many into one” by virtue of its paradoxical nature; for it “concerns more than the many, namely strictly speaking the sum total of all citizens.”³⁹ Or, as she also puts it, politics assumes that “one and the same topic . . . despite its oneness, appears in a great diversity of views.”⁴⁰ Because “human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings,” and this is true despite the fact that “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.”⁴¹

Whence the central importance of “natality” to Arendt’s conception of action.⁴² Indeed, this is what allows her to affirm an alternative source of glory: from what comes to those who defeat competitors, to what they defeat the competitors *with*, that is, the unprecedented act. After all, we continue to read and perform works of the ancient Athenian playwrights today not because the

³⁸ Arendt, “What Is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future*, p. 137; and see Robyn Marasco, “Machiavelli and the Play-Element in Political Life,” *Political Theory* 50, no. 4 (Aug. 2022): 575–95.

³⁹ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” p. 171; *The Human Condition*, p. 214; and *On Revolution*, p. 280.

⁴⁰ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” pp. 167–68. She also writes of how we should aim to “see the same world from another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects.” Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains,” p. 42.

⁴¹ 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 theoretical voice in *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

⁴² See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 176–78.

playwrights were winners of the City Dionysia, the municipality's theatre contest, but because of the plays themselves.

Arendt's conception of novelty in politics falls short of genuine creativity, however. For newness is one thing, and originality, in the sense of an original idea, is another. We can recognize that each and every newborn child is new and unique, for instance, without invoking originality. Arendt appears to emphasize the former rather than the latter – and she does so, I believe, because of her aestheticized conception of action. She equates the capacity to begin, to act in a way different from usual practice, with the creation of something new for its own sake, making this equivalent to art for art's sake, albeit in the political realm.

Indeed, there are two key differences between Arendt's novel political actions, on the one hand, and the creativity of artworks (outside of the Aestheticist movement), on the other. First, there's the idea that while political acts are necessarily public, work and labour – the production of durable and consumable things, respectively, including artworks – may not be.⁴³ So while she admits that there's an element of freedom present in the creative arts, she complains that its processes are unlike its products in that they remain hidden. And if they do not appear, then they do not matter.⁴⁴

Second, Arendt shares with Aristotle the belief that there can be no true freedom when it comes to making (*poiesis*) because its ends are external, that is, situated in what is made rather than in the maker. We change the world outside of us because we have to, given our needs as living beings, whereas when we truly act (*praxis*) our motivation remains internal, an end in itself. But this, as we've seen, only aestheticizes, allowing us to take pleasure in something new just because it is new. Think of our curiosity for, and enjoyment in, the news, even when it doesn't take the form of crass infotainment. Or consider this example from Addison in 1712: "Groves, Fields, and Meadows, are at any Season of the Year pleasant to look upon, but never so much as in the opening of the Spring, when they are all new and fresh, with their first Gloss upon them, and not yet too much accustomed and familiar to the Eye."⁴⁵

⁴³ See *ibid.*, chs. 2–3.

⁴⁴ See Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" p. 154.

⁴⁵ Addison, "No. 412 – Monday June 23rd, 1712," in Addison *et al.*, *The Spectator in Four Volumes: Volume Three*, p. 280; see also Robin Dix, "Addison and the Concept of 'Novelty' as a Basic Aesthetic Category," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 383–90.

Originality brought into the world by genius, however, whether in the form of artworks or political words or deeds, is judged as valuable not because it is simply new and so enjoyable, but because whether or not it is enjoyable it provides a previously unknown perspective, one that contributes in some sense to making the world a better place. In politics, manifestly, this is the kind of originality that helps resolve conflicts justly. Thus, it reflects (one of the forms of) genuine virtue, which Arendt fails to distinguish from its aestheticized version, namely virtuosity. It was, she recounts, when the ancient Greeks assessed performances, “the sheer beauty of appearances,” that “virtue was what we would call virtuosity.”⁴⁶ And as she also wrote of Machiavelli’s *virtù*:

Its meaning is best rendered by “virtuosity,” that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), *where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself* and not in the end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it.⁴⁷

Similarly, Arendt fails to distinguish between the fame that can accrue to those who contribute practically to the common good, and the aestheticized form of fame that we call celebrity, that which is obtained by someone who becomes famous for its own sake – the person, as Daniel J. Boorstin has described, “*who is known for his well-knownness.*”⁴⁸

Moreover, when it comes to virtuous originality that’s truly creative, we ought to recognize the great role played by that mysterious thing, inspiration, which Arendt seems unwilling to do. And because inspiration is normally understood to be at least somewhat irrational, I think creative originality in politics should be included among the forceful, and so non-dialogical, responses to conflict. After all, to participate in a dialogue is to exchange interpretations, not creations; indeed, in the best, conversational case, interlocutors strive to *make sense of something*, to reach a shared

⁴⁶ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, I, pp. 130–31.

⁴⁷ Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” p. 151.

⁴⁸ See Arendt, “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,” in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 55; and Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Random House, 2012 [1961]), pp. 57, 59, 217, 256. Despite (some of) what she says, Arendt appears to see fame and celebrity as different only in degree: “fame comes in many sorts and sizes – from the one-week notoriety of the cover story to the splendor of an everlasting name.” Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), p. 1; see also “Prologue,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), pp. 10–11.

understanding, not to *make something up*. When this kind of dialogue succeeds, furthermore, the common good benefits without being exposed to the risks that necessarily attend any genuinely creative act. This is why I would claim that “dialogue first” constitutes the best way to support a genuine politics.

Arendt’s Politics: Aestheticized Action and Judgment

Despite advancing a republic that’s both more durable and more novel than those of most classical republicans, we’ve seen that Arendt shares their embrace of competitive play, which I have identified as one of the modes of the aesthetic. It should come as no surprise, then, that she has referred to the festival of life as a “game,” and to her preferred competition for glory as “the game of politics” – no wonder that, for Arendt, “acting is fun.”⁴⁹ Also worth noting is her claim that an action ought to be guided by a “principle,” one that “becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself.”⁵⁰ For this suggests that such principles are like the rules of a game in that they are to be adopted, first and foremost, for their own sake. At least we can say that Arendt doesn’t gamify *justice*, as John Rawls has done.⁵¹

The other modes of the aesthetic are likewise present in her accounts of not only acting but also judging. To begin with the former, for Arendt, it is only when “the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself” – that is, when an action is carried out for its own sake rather than to fulfill the goals of a movement or some other cause – that we may speak of “the shining glory of great deeds,” making this a clear case of aesthetic show or spectacle.⁵² Show is also relevant to Arendt’s insistence that great 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

⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, I, p. 94; and “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1972), p. 203.

⁵⁰ Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” pp. 150–51; see also *The Human Condition*, p. 206; and *The Life of the Mind*, I, pp. 130–31.

⁵¹ See my “[Taking Politics Seriously](#),” *Philosophy* 94, no. 2 (Apr. 2019): 271–94; and “[Politics, Anyone?](#)” *The Hedgehog Review* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 12–14.

⁵² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 206, 35; see also Mary G. Dietz, “The Slow Boring of Hard Boards: Methodical Thinking and the Work of Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 4 (Dec. 1994): 873–86, pp. 879–80. For another example of the aestheticist praise of “shining” in life, see Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrence Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

is common to all.”⁵³ Evidently, Arendt fails to acknowledge that contributions to the common good can be made in ways unknown to the public; quiet heroes are not impossible in politics.

Moreover, serious acting – as distinct from the showy kind – cannot be as distinct from making as Arendt assumes. As Charles Taylor has described, such acting is “expressive,” it manifests meaning in embodiments, concrete practices; its sense is thus both internal to the action and external, since it’s a form of communication.⁵⁴ Taylor is thinking here in the tradition of Hegel and Marx, following Adam Smith, according to which acting and making are dialectical, since each can have an effect on agents as well as produce outcomes that cannot be restricted to them.⁵⁵ Or we might put the philosophy of action aside and simply reflect on the expression “to make a move,” which brings out the fuzziness of the line we might wish to draw between the two concepts.

Turning now to judging, Arendt tells us that “action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness.”⁵⁶ But does she mean genuine greatness, which, we’ve noted, is achieved by those who make serious contributions to the common good, or merely the aestheticized version? Here is what she says: “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.”⁵⁷ Evidently, these words and deeds are to be savoured, appreciated for their own sake.

So we can see why Arendt distinguishes the judgment of the spectator from theorizing, the kind of thought carried out by solitary thinkers who aim for truth (*aletheia*) about invisible abstractions.⁵⁸ This also means avoiding the reductiveness of Aristotle’s practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), which judges according to the fixed criteria of a theory: one aims one’s arrow at a

⁵³ Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” p. 214

⁵⁴ See Taylor, “Action as Expression,” in Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichman, eds., *Intention and Intentionality: Essays in Honour of G.E.M. Anscombe* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979). Arendt would object that the expression of an appearance doesn’t “press out” something internal; rather, it “expresses” nothing but itself, that is, it exhibits or displays.” *The Life of the Mind*, I, p. 30. But this is aesthetic show, not practical presentation.

⁵⁵ 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); and for a classic relevant study, E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38, no. 1 (Dec. 1967): 56–97.

⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 205.

⁵⁷ Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” p. 215.

⁵⁸ See Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, I.

pre-established target, the hierarchy of virtues that brings flourishing (*eudaimonia*) because it is true to human nature (*Eth. Nic.* 1094a24–25, 1112b34–1113a1).⁵⁹ Arendt thus turns instead to Kant, to his concept of reflective, aesthetic judgment that develops opinions (*doxa*) about the world of appearances. Unlike the *phronimos*, this judge steps back from the world in order to compare what appears to an “exemplary validity” so as to enact what Arendt, citing Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (A79/B104), describes as the “bringing to a concept” instead of the “subsuming under a concept” that characterizes reductive judgment.⁶⁰ “The only condition for this exertion of the imagination,” she adds, “is disinterestedness, the liberation from one’s own private interests.” It is what makes impartiality possible, and so the achievement of Arendt’s version of what Kant called an “enlarged mentality.”⁶¹

Now these exemplary validities are a species of “substantive symbols,” and they are aesthetic. And while it’s true that the figure of Achilles can help us evaluate a case of courage, I have to wonder why Arendt believes such symbols facilitate the perception of tables or dogs, which are also examples she gives.⁶² Evidently, she thinks it makes sense to speak of a “‘table’ as such,” as if tables could be conceived atomistically, whereas Wittgenstein has taught that this isn’t even true of “games.”⁶³ This suggests that to conceive of such things, as distinct from appreciating or playing with them aesthetically, requires perceiving them holistically rather than atomistically, and so as integrated in a practical context with others.⁶⁴

And so, though Jim Josefson has argued that Arendt gives an important place to conversation in her politics, and though he’s quite right that her approach must be distinguished from those

⁵⁹ See Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” p. 102; and Jussi Backman, “Für das Wohnen denken: Heidegger, Arendt und die praktische Besinnung,” in Alfred Denker *et al.*, eds., *Heidegger und Aristoteles* (Freiburg: Alber, 2007), pp. 218–20.

⁶⁰ Arendt, “Imagination,” in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 83.

⁶¹ Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” p. 237; and see “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,” pp. 43, 71, 73–74.

⁶² See Arendt, “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,” pp. 76–77, 82; “Imagination”; as well as “Truth and Politics,” p. 243.

⁶³ Arendt, “Imagination,” p. 82; and see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe, R. Rhees, and G.H. von Wright, trans. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968, 3rd ed.), § 66, 68–69, 75–76.

⁶⁴ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012 [1945]), pp. 38, 44, 86, 101, 113, 337–38. Arendt wouldn’t agree: “The proper criterion by which to judge appearances is beauty; if we wanted to judge objects, even ordinary use-objects, by their use-value alone and not also by their appearance – that is, by whether they are beautiful or ugly or something in between – we would have to pluck out our eyes.” Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” p. 207.

models of discourse advanced by political liberals and deliberative or agonistic democrats, the main goal of her “representative thinking,” that of achieving “impartial generality,”⁶⁵ is not the one I have associated with conversation. It’s not because judgment as she conceives of it doesn’t aim to reconcile conflict so much as to reconcile people to the existence of their conflicts. While this still seems to me to require a practical, rather than aesthetic, engagement with the imagination, Josefson is correct that it can make way for people’s different positions to be appreciated not as true or moral but as sources of “genuine delight,” adding that this also means that we must “be open to elements of diversity that we do not like. A bald way of saying that is that we must be reconciled to the factual truth that bigoted citizens are, indeed, part of our world.”⁶⁶ However, this could never be satisfactory to a person interested in the common good; on the contrary, they would very probably try to convince others that they’re wrong to be bigoted. (And if this failed, they would either reluctantly negotiate with them or, yes, fight.)

What Josefson describes is more like what people looking for an entertaining movie to watch get from a review-aggregator like Rotten Tomatoes. Yet if one wishes to be challenged rather than merely entertained, to engage with a film critically and possibly transform one’s values, painful though it may be, then one should seek the interpretations of only the best critics – curators rather than polls, as Kyle Chayka might put it.⁶⁷ Conversation, then, is unlike debate in that it requires earnest, serious interlocutors, people who are not in it primarily for enjoyment. It depends not on representative thinking but on listening, often great listening, by which I mean a willingness to hear one’s opponent out, maintaining an open mind even when the conflict threatens one’s most cherished values. It should go without saying that this is what’s required for developing solutions to our most difficult political problems.

Instead of possible solutions, what we all too frequently get from Arendt is distorted judgment. Consider Judith N. Shklar’s account of Arendt’s attraction to “monumental history,” the kind that aims to remind political actors of spectacular deeds in the past as a spur to perform spectacular deeds in the present. The problem with monumental history is that it not only relies on, but also

⁶⁵ See Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” pp. 237–38.

⁶⁶ Josefson, pp. 274–75; and see, in general, ch. 7 of his book.

⁶⁷ See Chayka, *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2024), ch. 6. Where the poll says no more than “Enjoy!”, the curator (in this case Greil Marcus) invites, “Listen to me; I’ll listen to you.” Marcus, “Why I Write: Finding a Life’s Work,” *The Yale Review* 111, no. 4 (Winter 2023): 8–18, p. 9.

often offends, “critical history,” which aims for fidelity to historical truth.⁶⁸ Accordingly, Shklar suggests that Arendt’s great desire to find heroic pariahs rather than contemptible parvenus moved her to write the passages in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* where she blames the Eastern European Jewish victims of the Holocaust (along with their leaders) for failing to resist the Nazis more courageously. The same desire led her to scold African American parents for sending their children to newly desegregated schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. As Shklar comments: “Her ignorance of American post-Civil War history, of racism, of constitutional law, and of Southern politics was total.”⁶⁹

Unlike Arendt, then, I think we should engage a practical form of judgment in politics, taking into account both the intentions behind an action and what it did or could accomplish. Rather than relying strictly on the imagination, such judgment is based on a transformative form of reason, one that can be seen as a contemporary hermeneutical, and so non-reductive, version of *phronēsis*.⁷⁰ It is what’s required of dialogue as the exchange of interpretations, and it achieves fidelity to the parts of a whole context by distinguishing between them without invoking exemplary, abstract templates. In fact, the importance of making distinctions in hermeneutics goes way back: it’s not for nothing that herms, ancient boundary marker stones, were commonly adorned with a sculptured head of Hermes, the messenger of the gods.⁷¹ So where Arendt assumes that opinions ought to be formed by disinterested judges who “exert their reason coolly and freely,”⁷² uncontaminated by their interests as members of groups or even the whole political community, interpreting citizens

⁶⁸ See Shklar, “Rethinking the Past,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 353–56.

⁶⁹ Shklar, “Hannah Arendt as Pariah,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, p. 373; see also pp. 372–73; as well as Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1964, rev. ed.), esp. pp. 11–12, 117–26; “Reflections on Little Rock,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*; and Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁷⁰ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989, 2nd rev. ed.), pp. 18–20, 311, 314, 317–19, 535–36, 559.

⁷¹ While his hermeneutics is overly reconstructive because Romantic, Friedrich Schleiermacher was known to emphasize distinguishing as essential to immanent, conceptual mapping and so to understanding. One of his aphorisms, for instance, has it that “In philosophy discovering the variations which develop within a school can run parallel to gaining an explanation of it.” Schleiermacher, “The Aphorisms on Hermeneutics from 1805 and 1809/10,” in Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift, eds., *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 73.

⁷² Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 227.

as I conceive of them remain interested, and so practical, as they engage in “warm” practical reasoning in order to dialogue about their common good.⁷³

There are, it should be said, limits to Arendt’s aestheticizing. For one, she’s wary of the mode of the aesthetic that I’ve identified as fantasizing, since she sees it as the basis of the poisonous fictions underlying Nazi ideology, for example.⁷⁴ And to the extent that the Nazis entertained antisemitic conspiracy theories, she’s surely right to do so.⁷⁵

Moreover, even when it comes to the modes of the aesthetic she favours, Arendt is critical of unsophisticated engagement with them, which for her tends to mean outside of politics. That’s why she distinguishes the playing and showing of political actors and the savouring of political spectators from more mundane forms of these activities, which, she believes, are not really carried out for their own sakes. They thus fail to constitute acts of genuine leisure (*scholē*) because leisure requires us to be “liberated from domination by life’s necessities,” whereas mundane playing, showing, and savouring serve no more than the goal of rest, “the restoration of the human labor force charged with taking care of life’s necessities.” Rather than leisure time, then, Arendt thinks that they fill mere “vacant time.”⁷⁶

This leads her to accounts such as the one she offers of the petty pleasures that have supposedly come to charm the French. It’s so acerbic, 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 the French people. Since the decay of their once great and glorious public

⁷³ See my *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics*, pp. 25–28.

⁷⁴ See Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” pp. 322–32; “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,” pp. 42–44; “Truth and Politics,” 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*.

⁷⁵ See my “[Antisemitism and the Aesthetic](#),” *The Philosophical Forum* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 189–210.

⁷⁶ Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” p. 117; *The Life of the Mind*, I, p. 93; “The Crisis in Culture,” p. 202; and see “Tradition in the Modern Age,” in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 18–19. Aristotle could be said to agree, since he would regard most of the 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.

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.⁷⁷

Or think of Arendt’s reference to Heidegger’s critique of the inauthentic gossiping public, the amused “mere talk” or “incomprehensible triviality” of “the they.”⁷⁸ (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.”⁷⁹) Likewise, Arendt scorns those who approach artworks not as objects capable of “arresting our attention and moving us,” but merely 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 commodification.⁸⁰ Finally, consider Arendt’s claim that, because the actors or virtuosi of stage and screen are, unlike political actors, judged by

⁷⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 52.

⁷⁸ Arendt, “Preface” to *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993 [1968]), p. ix. Arendt was, however, critical of what she saw as the antipolitical philosophical tradition underlying this observation. See her “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, pp. 432–33; and *The Life of the Mind*, II, pp. 191–94.

⁷⁹ 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.

⁸⁰ Arendt, “Tradition in the Modern Age,” p. 28; see also “The Crisis in Culture,” pp. 200–202.

overly contemporary standards, they can only “renounce immortality,” which is why they are “forever frustrated and require hysterical outlets.”⁸¹

Yet these examples suggest that Arendt is simply being condescending. After all, there is no substantive difference between these various ways of engaging in aesthetics and those practiced by the political actors and spectators she praises. Whether or not one is justified in describing the modes of the aesthetic as leisurely, the fact is that they are all carried out for their own sake. Arendt just happens to prefer deriving aesthetic pleasure from politics, or thinking about politics. Whence this remark from her friend Hans J. Morgenthau: “As others enjoy playing cards or the horses for their own sake, so Hannah Arendt enjoyed thinking.”⁸²

Why?

Evidently, I believe that the main motivation behind Arendt’s philosophy is the enjoyment of the aesthetic. One can, however, always attach external ends to aesthetic activities (think of the salary of the professional athlete). So even though I’m wary of overly *ad hominem* explorations, I nevertheless want to suggest an additional, functionalist psychological motivation. For I agree with Shiraz Dossa 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.⁸³

⁸¹ 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.

⁸² 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 she didn’t really think for its own sake, but for that of some practical good.

⁸³ Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), p. 13.

Arendt herself would concur: “I do not believe there is any thought process without personal experience. Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event. Isn’t that so? I live in the modern world, and obviously my experience is in and of the modern world.”⁸⁴

Consider, then, Arendt’s association of evil with totalitarianism, not least its inhumane bureaucracy. The association allows her to keep the aesthetic as a place apart, and so as a potential home for political liberty as she conceives of it. As she writes: “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.”⁸⁵ I would say the same of her attempt to naturalize evil by referring to it metaphorically as a fungus; this is another way of keeping it extra-aesthetic. So, too, is her decision to label it banal, which arose partly from the fear that to call something diabolical risks glamorizing it.⁸⁶ The irony here, as Gershom Scholem points out, is that “the banality of evil” – Arendt’s famous subtitle – is no more than “a slogan,” one which exhibits the same tone of “flippancy” (she herself described it as “predominantly ironic”) that characterizes much of her writing on Eichmann; the idea, in other words, is itself aesthetic rather than the product of a practical “in-depth analysis.”⁸⁷ Moreover, it fails to give due regard to the fact that, alongside fantasizing, the Nazis were no less engaged in the other modes of the aesthetic. Just think of their parades, architecture, and stylish coats.⁸⁸ Or consider something else 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

⁸⁴ Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains,’” p. 20.

⁸⁵ Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” p. 308.

⁸⁶ See Arendt, “The Eichmann Controversy: A Letter to Gershom Scholem,” in *The Jewish Writings*, pp. 470–71; 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 thought-defying because banal; it is thought-destroying. So I don’t agree with Arendt that what she calls “holes of oblivion” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 232) are unrealistic.

⁸⁷ Scholem, 23 June 1963 letter to Arendt, in *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, ed. Marie Luise Knott, trans. Anthony David (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 202, 204–205; and Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains,’” p. 16. Or as Lionel Abel has complained: “to make moral or political [as distinct from 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.

⁸⁸ See Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson, 2002).

us he was, 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.⁸⁹

Which leads me to ask: Is not the enjoyment of power, where it is exercised for its own sake rather than for some cause, a core element of fascism?⁹⁰ Arendt evidently failed to grasp the full significance of her friend Walter Benjamin's famous declaration that "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life."⁹¹ My claim, then, is that she was unwilling to acknowledge these other modes of Nazism because she wanted to keep it as much as possible outside of the aesthetic.

She was being escapist, in other words. Not in the childish, neotenic or Peter Pan sense, the kind of which the writer P.G. Wodehouse has rightly been accused.⁹² No, Arendt had experienced the worst of adulthood, and escape to the aesthetic was the only way she could continue loving the world despite Auschwitz. That is why she needed the distance provided by *Eichmann in Jerusalem's* ironic tone, and it is why, when it came to conventional (i.e. practical) politics, she

⁸⁹ Scholem, 2 August 1963 letter to Arendt, in *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, pp. 213–14.

⁹⁰ "The action the fascists glorified was not so much action with a specific end in view as action for its own sake." Zeev Sternhall, "Fascist Ideology," in Walter Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader's Guide – Analyses, Interpretations, Bibliography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 342. Eichmann aestheticized power not only through play-acting but also, as Scholem makes clear, by presenting himself to his frightened victims as sublime. And as Edmund Burke showed, power combined with beauty is a source of sublimity: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990 [1757]), part II § 5. Not that one must be a fascist to appreciate power in these ways. According to Thomas Nagel, "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.

⁹¹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, p. 194.

⁹² As George Orwell remarked of Wodehouse, "his moral outlook has remained that of a public-school boy"; and as Christopher Hitchens put it, his was "a very advanced case of arrested development." Orwell, "In Defense of P.G. Wodehouse (1945)," in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 168; and Hitchens, "The Honorable Schoolboy," *The Atlantic*, November 2004. Note that Johan Huizinga has called the play attitude unrestricted by temporal or spatial limits "puerilism." See Huizinga, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow: A Diagnosis of the Modern Distemper*, trans. J.H. Huizinga (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1936), ch. 16.

once answered a question about where she sat on the political spectrum by declaring, “I am nowhere.”⁹³ Of course, escape is justified when one is being targeted and has no alternative, as she herself recognized.⁹⁴ But she developed her philosophy mainly while living in the United States.

Needless to say, I didn’t know Arendt, so I’m making no more than a conjecture. Perhaps it reveals only my own preoccupations. Or perhaps it’s all too easy for me, as a Canadian, to take a harsh view of her. She had to contend with real evil, while my country has only recently begun to grapple seriously with the possibility that its domestic history includes (not only cultural but also physical) genocide.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Ronald Beiner, from whom I’ve learned a great deal, once made a remark about Arendt that strikes me as implausible: “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 to reflect on what it meant.”⁹⁶ While I can see how this could be true of a person who engages in strictly aesthetic judgment, Arendt must have sensed that she failed to develop a consistent answer to the question of whether actors, and not only spectators, judge in some sense. Richard J. Bernstein argues that they both do, leading him to conclude that there is “a ‘flagrant’ contradiction that stands at the heart of her work.”⁹⁷ Diane Lamoureux claims that, for Arendt, “to judge is, above all, to be capable of action [for] judgment abolishes the difference between

⁹³ 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.

⁹⁴ See Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” trans. Clara and Richard Winston, in *Men in Dark Times*, p. 22.

⁹⁵ 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).

⁹⁶ Beiner, “Rereading Hannah Arendt’s Kant Lectures,” in *Philosophy in A Time of Lost Spirit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 192. Note, however, that on p. 140 of his “Hannah Arendt on Judging,” in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Beiner has himself pointed out that judging “maintains a natural affinity” with “the world of the *vita activa*.”

⁹⁷ Bernstein, “Judging – the Actor and the Spectator,” in *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 221.

actor and spectator.”⁹⁸ And Albrecht Wellmer goes even further: “[I]t is a consequence of Arendt’s own theory of action that the judging activity of the disinterested spectator may in the end become the only genuine form of political action.”⁹⁹ Finally, Jonathan Peter Schwartz sees Arendtian judgment as supporting a wholly unproblematic relation between theory and practice: by formulating opinions that appeal to a form of intersubjective validity, common sense, which has long been associated with Aristotelian prudence, is given a fundamental, practical role.¹⁰⁰ These different interpretations are possible, I believe, only because there are times when Arendt’s position once again reflects a paradoxical pluramorphism.

That said, Arendt was not being paradoxical when she declared that she could very well live without doing anything. On the contrary, her claim rests on a clear and consistent distinction, albeit one that reflects the playfulness – and decadence – typical of pluramorphic philosophies that have degraded to monism and become aesthetic. A part of her must indeed have hoped to do no more than approach the world aesthetically, engaging in the kind of judgment that “does not tell one how *to act*,” since “the insights of aesthetic and reflective judgment have no practical consequences.”¹⁰¹ This cannot mean, however, that it is “quite possible to understand and to reflect about politics without being a so-called political animal.”¹⁰² For while one can choose to appreciate strictly aesthetically when it comes to dogs or tables, one cannot truly *understand* something such as a genocide, say, without wishing for one’s judgment to lead to actions that would make it stop. So to suggest that Arendt did not intend for her publications to have an impact on the practical world strains credulity. I can only conclude that her irony wasn’t limited to the book on Eichmann. Unlike Rawlsians and their gamification of justice, then, Arendt must have been at least partly aware of the degree to which her approach lacks seriousness. I’m not sure whether I find this more, or less, disconcerting.

⁹⁸ Lamoureux, “Hannah Arendt, l’esthétique et le politique,” *Revue québécoise de science politique*, no. 25 (1994): 65–87, pp. 85, 87 (my translation). Shmuel Lederman would agree: “Agonism and Deliberation in Arendt,” *Constellations* 21, no. 3 (Sept. 2014): 327–37, p. 334.

⁹⁹ Wellmer, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment: The Unwritten Doctrine of Reason,” in Beiner and Nedelsky, eds., p. 168.

¹⁰⁰ See Schwartz, *Arendt’s Judgment: Freedom, Responsibility, Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), ch. 5.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,” pp. 44, 53. Or as she says on p. 15, “Judgment is not practical reason; practical reason ‘reasons’ and tells me what to do and what not to do.”

¹⁰² Arendt, “Prologue,” p. 8.