

Section 9. Philosophy

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JUDGMENT AS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN SPECTATOR AND ACTOR: A REFUTATION OF BEINER'S INTERPRETATION OF ARENDT

Abstract. Arendt's theory of judgment has puzzled her readers for a long time. Beiner and other scholars believe that Arendt has two different kinds of theories of judgment, and they also believe that the theory of judgment in Arendt's later writings indicates that she has shifted her focus from action to mind. But this view is a misreading of Arendt. Arendt's working always focus on the question "how can we act morally", and there is only one theory of judgment for Arendt.

Keywords: Arendt, judgment, reflection, Political Philosophy.

For Arendt's readers, her writings about judgment are often confusing. Her theory of judgment gradually takes shape in her thinking life. When Arendt finally decided to systematically discuss a theory of judgment in *The Life of the Mind*, life did not leave her more time to complete the work. Therefore, what Arendt's theory of judgment is has become a puzzling problem.

Ronald Beiner famously proposes that we can see Arendt's theory of judgment from her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. In his excellent article on Arendt's theory of judgment, Beiner says that Arendt actually has two theories of judgment, "practical and contemplative" [9, p. 92]. In Beiner's view, Arendt's thinking about judgment has undergone a turn. Before writing *Thinking and Moral Consideration*, Arendt's thinking about judgment was based on the perspective of *vita activa*. Since that article, Arendt turned to thinking about judgment from the perspective of *vita contemplativa*. Beiner believes that this is because:

The more she reflected on the faculty of judgment, the more inclined she was to regard it as the prerogative of the solitary (though public-spirited) contemplator as opposed to the actor (whose activity is necessarily nonsolitary) [9, p. 92].

In this article I argue that Beiner's view is a misreading of Arendt. I will argue that Arendt has only one theory of judgment from beginning to end. Although Arendt's perspective on judgment has changed, this change is only a development of the same theory of judgment, rather than the development of a different theory of judgment. Beiner's view comes from his misreading that actors and spectators are diametrically opposed for Arendt. And this misreading stems from his one-sided understanding of Arendt's concepts of men-in-plural and reflective ability. In the first part I claim that men in plural not only means human beings living with each other in nature, but also means the ability to talk with oneself. This ability depends on what Arendt calls reflective ability, which also makes people have community

sense, so that they can make judgments. In the second part, I write about Arendt's distinction between common sense and community sense, and it will lead us to the question of how judgment works – which I will write about in the third part. In the fourth part I want to argue that Beiner misunderstood Arendt's distinction between judgment and pre-judgment or prejudice. And in the end, I will argue that Beiner's interpretation of two theories of judgment is a result of a combination of these misunderstandings.

Men in Plural

Arendt's concept of men in plural has two meanings. On the one hand, it means people living among people, and on the other hand, it means the dialogue between me and myself. The description of the former is best expressed in *The Human Condition*:

(T)he human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world [2, p. 1].

In Arendt's view, we have been a member of the human beings since we were born, and we cannot live alone without others, not only because we will rely on others for material needs, but also because of our mind structure. Our personality can only be built by living with others. Arendt distinguishes three kinds of human activities in *The Human Condition*: labor, work and act. In Arendt's view, labor is only the lowest level activity to meet the needs of life, and it considers nothing except survival itself:

(In labor) where the human body, its activity notwithstanding, is also thrown back upon itself, concentrates upon nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning [2, p. 115].

This isolated nature of labor not only shows that it is non-human, but also non-political, since it focuses only on necessity and is unrelated to freedom or autonomy.

Arendt's understanding of work is similar to Aristotle's understanding of production. To work means to produce something. Work, which is different from la-

bor, is not restricted by the necessity of life, but rather is a strategic activity, a means to achieve a certain purpose. The purpose of writing is books, and the purpose of books is to be read, and the purpose of reading is knowledge or just for enjoying. There is always a purpose in work, and the meaning of work is to achieve a certain purpose, but the work itself is meaningless. This teleological activity allows human to break out of the cycle of life and create an artificial world, but the activity itself is meaningless. Strictly speaking, it is still not free or autonomous. Only act can give human dignity and create meaning for human life, because it is totally autonomous. Like Aristotle writes:

(F)or every producer in his production aims at some (further) goal, acting well is the goal, and desire is for the goal [8, p. 87].

For Arendt, the meaning of act is not dependent on purposes, but act itself. In acting, the process itself is the achievement of the purpose, in which the achievement is not the product, but the actor himself, his own life character, his personality. And act is possible only among people, that is, act depends on the plurality of human beings. And we also need:

– With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world... This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them [2, p. 176].

It is the plurality of human beings that enables us to live in a human world and create the meaning of life among people through act.

The other meaning of the plurality, that is, the ability to talk with oneself, mainly comes from Arendt's understanding of Socrates. Arendt believes that the key to Socrates' dialogue was to investigate whether the interlocutor could agree with himself and avoid self-contradiction. Self-contradiction shows that we do not know what our own views really are. And we can try to reach agreement through dialogue with ourselves, that is, through reflection. Socrates' interlocutors often forget about their abil-

ity to reflect. Therefore, in the dialogues with them, Socrates plays the role of the other themselves that they should have talked with. By pointing out the contradictions in their views, Socrates tries to arouse their ability to reflect. This is the meaning of the oracle "Know yourself" that Socrates understood according to Arendt.

Arendt believes that "in thought I am two-in-one" [3, p. 20]. As long as I am thinking, I will inevitably have a dialogue with myself. Therefore, the plurality of human beings can not be eliminated. Even if I live alone, I still live with myself, and thus still live in the plurality. The reason why Socrates insisted on constantly talking with others in the city-state and trying to help them arouse their ability to reflect is based on the belief that "only he who knows how to live with himself is fit to live with others" [3, p. 21]. What Arendt sees here is what we usually call conscience. It's not Kant's practical reason – that is, to judge whether an action is moral based on whether my maxim can become a universal law – but the fact that I have to live with myself that constitutes the basis of our moral judgment.

If I commit injustice, then I will have to live with the myself who did injustice all the time. I can stay away from other thieves, liars or murderers, but I cannot stay away from the myself who is a thief, liar or murderer. Even though we all have the impulse to do injustice for our own profit, no one is willing to suffer injustice, and no one is willing to live with the person who does injustice. It is this inner taste, that is, likes and dislikes that enable us to make moral choices when we act:

I cannot do certain things, because having done them I shall no longer be able to live with myself [4, p. 97].

So far, I have explained how Arendt explored the plurality of human beings from both external and internal aspects (or from the perspective of act and mind), and as I will explain later, it is the plurality of human beings that enables us to have the community sense. However, it seems that Beiner only re-

gards the plurality as arising "from the need for the citizen to address himself to their his fellows" [1, p. 106]. It seems that Beiner only regards plurality as a description of people's need to talk to each other and live together and ignores the internal aspect of this concept. It makes him have to rely on Kant's explanation when analyzing the concept of community sense. Although Arendt has obtained many resources from Kant, Arendt is not Kant, and the concept of community sense that Arendt understands is also different from Kant. Kant only posits the community sense as the necessary condition of aesthetic judgment. But for Arendt, community sense is a mental ability that actually exists as a starting point. Pace Beiner, the plurality of human beings does not stem from the need for a person to communicate with others. Rather, it is only because human beings is plural and have community sense that we can communicate with others.

Community Sense and Common Sense

Community sense was identified by Arendt when she reformed Kant's theory of judgment. Kant regards *sensus communis* as a prerequisite basis of aesthetic judgment. The pleasure or unpleasure brought by taste is a direct feeling, but whether such pleasure or unpleasure is worth approving depends on *sensus communis*.

Arendt believes that Kant actually distinguished community sense from common sense:

The term "common sense" meant a sense like our other senses – the same for everyone in his very privacy. By using the Latin term, Kant indicates that here he means something different: an extra sense-like an extra mental capability – that fits us into a community [1, p. 70].

But Beiner does not seem to mention this distinction in his article. He claims that:

Arendt appeals to the Aristotelian distinction between *phronesis* and *sophia*: the latter strives to rise above common sense; the former is rooted in common sense, which "disclose to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world"; it "enable

man to orient himself in the public realm, in the common world.” This defense of common sense, it should be noted, is a persistent theme in Arendt’s work. Common sense means sharing a nonsubjective and “objective” (object-laden) world with others [1, p. 104].

It seems that Beiner only understands the word “common sense” as its literal meaning and simply regards the word as a description of the fact that we “sharing a nonsubjective and ‘objective’ (object-laden) world with others” [1, p. 104]. But in the passage he cites, what Arendt uses common sense to refer to is actually community sense. It was not until the twelfth lecture of *LKPP* that Arendt distinguishes the common sense from community sense. Before that, Arendt uses the word common sense in two ways, sometimes referring to common sense, sometimes referring to community sense. And community sense is not just a description but a mental faculty that makes us capable of “sharing a nonsubjective and ‘objective’ (object-laden) world with others” [1, p. 104]. We will see these points more clearly as my reconstruction unfolds.

Common sense for Arendt refers to those feelings we have in common. For example, when we hit a table, we all feel pain, because touch is the sense we have in common. But this feeling is private. Even though we all have a sense of touch, we cannot share our pain. Taste and smell also belong to the common senses.

Arendt claims that community sense, by contrast, is an extra feeling, which enables people to enlarge their minds and thinking from the possible position of others. It is also community sense that enables us to talk to each other and convey the private sense we feel from our common senses to others. If there is no community sense, our common sense will not be damaged, but we will not be able to transcend our private sense, and will lose the possibility of understanding others. For Arendt, the possibility of understanding others is only possible in communication or speech, and communication and speech are based on our community sense. The condition of missing community sense is what Arendt called insanity [1, p. 70].

The insane person did not lose his common sense, but he could not make any judgment. He only suffered from various direct feelings. There is no judgment or reflection in the direct sense of happy or unhappy. He is facing his direct experience and being wrapped in it. If we want to make a judgment, such as “This is beautiful” or “This is pleasant”, we must resort to the community sense, which requires us to reflect. Here we can also identify the figure of the actor and the spectator. The actor’s presence in the matter is like that we encounter all kinds of feelings directly by relying on common senses. Because we can’t distance ourselves, we can’t meet the requirements of “impartial” or “disinterested delights”, and we can’t make judgments about it. Relying on community sense, we can put ourselves in the possible perspective of others, and can separate ourselves from the direct feelings to reflect on them. At this time, we become a spectator, examining our own direct feelings and thinking about the possible feelings of others. Only at this time can we make judgments.

The Operating Process of Judgment and the Reflective Ability as Guarantee of the Plurality

Arendt clearly distinguished two mental operations in judgment. The first is the operation of imagination. By using imagination, we are no longer facing the outward object in the feelings we encounter directly. Instead, we face the inner object constructed by imagination, so that we can withdraw from the various feelings we encounter directly and turn from the outward senses to the inner senses.

This operation of imagination serves as the precondition for the operation of reflection –the second operation process of mind –and the operation process of reflection “is the actual activity of judging something” [1, p. 68]. The standard of the operation process of reflection – also the standard of judgment – is “communicability” or “publicness”, “and the standard of deciding about it is common sense” [1, p. 69]. The phrase common sense here is the translation of *sensus communis*, and what Arendt actually refers to is community sense.

According to Arendt, imagination moves us away from the outward objects and the feelings we encountered directly, and transforms them into inner objects to give to our inner sense. And this inner sense is discriminative, it can make us feel pleasure or unpleasure. For the pleasant or unpleasant feelings, people may approve or disapprove, and such approval or disapproval is our judgment. The question is, why does Arendt think “the actual activity of judging something” is “the operation of reflection”? [1, p. 68]

It is reflection that forms the bridge between actor and spectator, enabling individuals to transition between the two figures. That is to say, to make judgment is to turn from the actor to the spectator. Judgment is not the exclusive ability of the spectator, but a kind of mental function that exists universally in individuals. It is the potential that individuals can transform themselves from the actor to the spectator that enables people to make judgment. Just like Kant uses judgment to form the bridge between practical reason and pure reason, Arendt uses it to form the bridge between actor and spectator.

One story we are familiar with regarding reflection is that of Narcissus, who died of despair because he was infatuated with his own reflection in the river. Interestingly, we see a kind of reflection that is different from judgment here. In the process of reflection as judgment, the possible perspectives of others are included, so that I can transcend my ego and move from private sense to community sense. But in the story of Narcissus, however, he was trapped in himself due to his reflection, he could not take any action and finally went to destruction. Here, reflection is not judgment. It is not the bridge between actor and spectator. Instead, Narcissus' concern for reflection itself cuts off the possibility for individuals to transform between the two figures. The figures of Narcissus who is obsessed with reflection and the thoughtless or non-reflective Eichmann show that for a person with intact mentality, the actor and the spectator should be two-in-one.

The reflection as judgment ensures that we can transform between actor and spectator, and it is pre-

cisely this reflection that guarantees the plurality of human beings, which is the most fundamental reason why we can have community sense. An acute reader may think that I have made the mistake of circular argument here, because I seem to claim that: 1. the standard of judgment, that is, of the reflection as judgment, depends on community sense, 2) community sense depends on the plurality of human beings, and 3) the plurality of human beings needs to be guaranteed by reflection. It is necessary for me to explain it here.

Plurality of human beings is an a priori concept for Arendt, or we can say it is an a priori special feature of human beings, and community sense is the embodiment of this special feature in mental functions. But plurality is not always graspable for one despite its a priority. The relationship between plurality and community sense is just like that between the understanding and common sense for Kant. Kant regards common sense as “the common human understanding” [11, p. 173]. Our common sense may be damaged by disease or other reasons, and we may lose our sense of pain or vision or others, our understanding will therefore become impaired. Similarly, community sense may also be impaired, then we may forget our plurality as human beings, or we can say, our plurality as human beings has been covered. What Arendt especially focus on the impact of dialogue and reflection on the community sense.

Community sense enables us to take into account the possible views of others, but we also need to have dialogues with others to ensure the sensitivity and integrity of community sense. Here we will also think of Kant's discussion in *What is Enlightenment* –Arendt has also quoted relevant texts in *LKPP* –that although human beings have reason is a priori, it does not mean that all people can properly use their reason. That is why we need enlightenment, and enlightenment requires us to use our reason publicly. In the process of using our reason publicly, we can learn how to use our reason properly. Therefore, although plurality of human beings is a priori, this plurality needs to be confirmed in reflection and dialogue.

Otherwise, plurality may be covered and community sense may be damaged. At the same time, although the standard of reflection as judgment is community sense, the community sense also needs to be activated through reflection. When I make judgment, my community sense is activated by reflection, so I can incorporate the perspectives of others to make judgments. Without reflection, the community sense will remain in a state of silence. The most famous example in this regard is Eichmann. Without the community sense, reflection can not include the possible opinions of others, so it can only become Narcissus.

The problem is that if we need to talk with others to maintain the integrity of our community sense, then when someone lives in an environment that does not have the conditions to talk with others, for example, when our words are censored, when we might be imprisoned because of our own opinions, or we don't know whether we will be punished or even arrested because of what we said – it seems that our community sense will inevitably be damaged, so that we can not make judgment or reflection. That seems to be what happened in Nazi Germany.

So, living in this environment, do we really have no way out? Can we only wait in silence and imperceptibly for our community sense to be corrupted and our plurality as human beings to be erased? Arendt refused to accept such a pessimistic answer. She returned to thinking or reflective ability again and tried to give a more satisfactory answer.

As I mentioned earlier, the plurality of human beings means that we have the potential to talk to ourselves, and the realization of this potential, that is, the actual activity of talking to ourselves, is reflection. In reflection, I realized that I always live with myself – I also have mentioned the moral meaning of this fact in the previous paragraph. But this kind of morality “is politically relevant only in times of crisis and that the self as the ultimate criterion of moral conduct is politically a kind of emergency measure” [4, p. 104]. What we are facing here is not the question of judgment, but the question of how to act, because the

standard of judgment, that is, community sense, has been in jeopardy because we cannot have an actual dialogue with others, “the question of how to behave in such a circumstance became the most burning issue of the day” [4, p. 104]. When the possibility of our actual dialogue with others becomes slim or even non-existent, we can only protect our plurality of human beings through dialogue with ourselves, and act according to our own criterion. This way is not easy, but at least it reserves the possibility for us to keep our mental intact in a toxic environment.

We can imagine that if Eichmann has the ability to reflect and talk to himself, he may not end up committing such a crime. It is impossible for a person to accept living with a person who sends others into the gas chamber, let alone let the executioner live with his family. Living in an environment like Nazi Germany, if we want to keep our mentality intact, we must force ourselves to reflect constantly. Our thoughts and actions may be incompatible with those around us. Maybe everyone will think that we are wrong, and we may fall into self doubt and bear the spiritual burden all the time. Eichmann chose to escape from this burden. He completely gave up reflection and allowed his community sense to be corrupted. He has forgotten about the plurality of human beings. He completely lost the ability to make judgment, and he was unable to take any appropriate action. Therefore, as Arendt said, he was sincere when he declared his innocence in the trial, but was a foolish sincerity.

The Criterion of Action: Prejudice or Prejudgment

As we mentioned earlier, judgment needs community sense as the standard, and community sense needs us to have a dialogue with others to keep it sound. When the public space is corrupted and we lose the conditions for dialogue with others, we can only rely on the ability of reflection to dialogue with ourselves. Through reflection, I constantly activate my community sense, try my best to protect its intact, and constantly confirm my plurality as human beings in the process of dialogue with myself. Only

in this way can we make judgment and actions in this special situation. But this kind of judgment, that is, taking “self as the ultimate criterion of moral conduct” [4, p. 104], is just an emergency measure. In our daily behavior, our actions are based only on prejudice. Therefore, only when we can't talk with others, “exceptional circumstances became the rule of the land and the question of how to behave in such a circumstances became the most burning issue of the day” [4, p. 104].

Here, we should first clarify the use of the word prejudice in Arendt, so as to avoid misunderstanding. The word “prejudice” in Arendt's writing does not have the negative meaning we usually give it. The prejudice that Arendt said is more like what we call custom or opinion. This is not to say that Arendt confused these concepts, but because in her view, these concepts are fundamentally the same:

Prejudices are not personal idiosyncrasies, which, however immune to proof, always have a basis in personal experience, within which context they lay claim to the evidence of sensory perception. Because they exist outside of experience, however, prejudices can never provide such evidence, not even for those who are subject to them... Consequently prejudice plays a major role in the social arena. There really is no social structure which is not based more or less on prejudices that include certain people while excluding others. The freer a person is of prejudices of any kind, the less suitable he will be for the purely social realm [3, p. 100].

In our daily behavior, what provides the behavioral criterion is not judgment, not reflection as judgment, but prejudice or custom – pre-judgment. When we want to do something, the first thing that motivates or prevents us from doing it is pre-judgment factor – the answer to “what is good and what is bad” that we have been taught by the society in which we live – we always confuse these pre-judgment factors with morality, thus thinking that these prejudices and customs are “moral criterion”. Morality itself has been “collapsed into a mere set of mores – manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will” [3, p. 54].

Real morality requires us to make judgment rather than accept them without thinking. But the moral standards, as long as they are generally accepted by the society, “never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in” [3, p. 54]. However, in daily behavior, such a criterion of conduct is not necessarily bad. Prejudice, custom or pre-judgment enable us to take the most appropriate action in general and normal situations as quickly and easily as possible:

Man cannot live without prejudices, and not only because no human being's intelligence or insight would suffice to form an original judgment about everything on which he is asked to pass judgment in the course of his life, but also because such a total lack of prejudice would require a superman alertness [3, p. 99].

If we have to reflect on and judge everything, then we will eventually be overwhelmed by this detailed and complicated mental life and become unable to act. Prejudice provides us with the most efficient criterion of action in our daily life. Moreover, in a healthy social environment, we can enlarge our perspective by communicating our prejudice with others, so as to minimize the negative impact of prejudice. “(T)he world opens up differently to every man according to his position in it” [3, p. 14], but we share the same world, we can talk with others, so that the world can be more clearly and comprehensively discovered. Only under special circumstances, that is, as we mentioned earlier, when the public space is corrupted so that we cannot talk to others, will prejudice or pre-judgment criterion of action become dangerous. At this time, we cannot reduce the inertia and narrow perspective caused by prejudice by talking to others, and our pre-judgment criterion of action may also be completely reversed and become extremely immoral. In Nazi Germany, persecuting Jews became an immoral criterion of conduct, but it was still accepted as “moral standard” without thinking. It is in this case that the importance of judgment comes to light. We need to reject the laziness in thought, to reject the pre-judgment as the criteria for our actions, but to make judgement and reflect on

ourselves and regard ourselves as the ultimate criterion for moral actions, so as to avoid falling into the banality of evil like Eichmann.

Beiner notices the relationship between opinion and judgment in Arendt's early writings, but he never mentions prejudice in his article, even though Arendt specially uses pre-judice and pre-judgment to imply the relationship between prejudice and judgment. His neglect of this relationship makes him fail to distinguish pre-judgment and judgment and it causes him think that Arendt uses the concept of judgment in two completely way.

Conclusion

I reconstructed Arendt's theory of judgment by means of the concepts of men in plural and reflection. In this theory of judgment, we can see that Arendt's writing and thinking did not "turn" as Beiner said. Whether it was Arendt's writing about *vita activa* in her early years or thinking about judgment in her later years, Arendt's core concern was "how can we act morally" from beginning to end. Her thinking about judgment in her later years was also to answer in extreme circumstances, when all morality is reversed and disintegrated, how can we still act morally. It's not simply returning to the field of mental life and giving up the concern for action, as some scholars believe.

Beiner only regards plurality as a descriptive concept, which makes him ignore the rich connotation of this concept and the importance of the ability of dialogue between people and themselves, that is, reflection. This led him to take reflection only as a mental operation in judgment and ignore the role

of reflection as a bridge to connect actor and spectator. In my reconstruction of Arendt's theory of judgment, we have seen that only when the two figures of spectator and actor co-exist through reflection can we make judgments or actions. It is precisely because reflection ensures that people can change perspectives between actor and spectator, people can keep their community sense and then make judgment. If, as Beiner wrote, the actor and spectator are isolated from each other, then I will either fall into the situation of Eichmann or that of Narcissus.

And Beiner also fails to recognize the distinction made by Arendt on the two sources of criterion of act – pre-judgment and judgment. Therefore, Beiner sees that in Arendt's early writings and late writings, there seems to be two different judgments. And Beiner attributes the two different judgments to the actor and spectator who were isolated from each other in his opinion, and concludes that Arendt has two theories of judgment, one about practice, the judgment theory of actor, and one about contemplation, the theory of spectator. But now we can see that the judgment "organizing and summarizing the individual and particular under the general and universal" [3, p. 102] identified by Beiner is actually "a pre-judgment, a prejudice" [3, p. 102]. In daily life, prejudice or pre-judgment serves as the criterion for our actions. Only when the exception that we cannot talk to others has become the norm, we need to introduce judgment and reflection as the criterion of action. From beginning to end, Arendt has only one theory of judgment, it's the judgment about how to act morally.

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