06 2005

"We feel our freedom"

Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt

Linda M. G. Zerilli

> There never has been any 'aestheticization' of politics in the modern age
> because politics is aesthetic in principle.
> Jacques Rancière[1]

In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Arendt tenaciously holds that Kant's account of a reflective and aesthetic judgment in the third *Critique* provides a model for political judgment: such a judgment makes an appeal to universality while eschewing truth criteria and the subsumption under rules that characterize cognitive and logical judgments. "If you say, 'What a beautiful rose!' you do not arrive at this judgment by first saying, 'All roses are beautiful, this flower is a rose, hence this rose is beautiful,' writes Arendt.[2] What confronts you in a reflective judgment, then, is not the general category "rose" but the particular, *this* rose. That *this* rose is beautiful is not given in the universal nature of roses. The claim about beauty belongs to the structure of feeling rather than concepts. "[B]eauty is not a property of the flower itself," writes Kant, but only an expression of the pleasure felt by the judging subject in the reflective mode of apprehending it.[3]

Arendt's insistence that political judgments cannot be truth claims has puzzled her otherwise sympathetic readers. Most famous among them is Jürgen Habermas, who holds that Arendt's refusal to provide a "cognitive foundation" for politics and public debate leaves "a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion that cannot be closed with arguments."[4]

Before signing onto such a critique, we should ask why Arendt thought she needed an account of the judging faculty. According to Ronald Beiner, editor of the Kant Lectures, Arendt's concern was this: "How to affirm freedom?" Arendt saw in the judging faculty something that "allows us to experience a sense of positive pleasure in the contingency of the particular."[5]

Having astutely identified the importance of affect and the central problem of freedom in Arendt's work on judgment, Beiner goes on - quite inexplicably in my view - to endorse Habermas's critique, which ignores the theme of freedom and casts the problem of judgment strictly as one of ascertaining intersubjective validity. Seyla Benhabib captures this decisive interpretive gesture when, likewise trying to comprehend Arendt's turn to the third *Critique*, she writes: "What Arendt saw in Kant's doctrine of aesthetic judgment was [...] a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm." [6] This "procedure" is the process of imaginatively thinking from standpoints not one's own and forming what Kant called an "enlarged mentality." Once this interpretive move is in place, Benhabib, too, finds the turn to Kant not only curious but deeply mistaken.

And perhaps it is. If your primary concern is ascertaining intersubjective validity in the political realm, why not turn to a more empirical and practical form of rationality like the Aristotlean notion of *phronesis*? Why turn to a philosophical text that offers at

best a highly formalized account of validity that posits the agreement of others, but has no need of their actual consent. Worse still, why endorse a form of validity that is not objective but subjective, for it makes reference to nothing more than the subject's own feeling of pleasure and merely anticipates the assent of all? Before deciding who is "right," Arendt or her critics, let us first try to understand what this judging faculty is and why it might be relevant to democratic politics.

In the widest sense of the term, judgment is the faculty that allows us to order or make sense of our experience. Be it the particulars of objects that need to be related to concepts for the purposes of cognition or the particulars of events that need to be organized into narratives for the purposes of political life, judgment gives coherence and meaning to human experience. Whether what I see over there is a "tree," what I hear on the radio is a commentary on "the latest famine in Africa," or what I read in the paper is an editorial on the "war between the sexes," I am at once engaged in and a witness to the practice of judgment. The problem is that according to the logic of recognition at work in a "determinate judgment," which subsumes particulars under rules, it is hard to see how there could be a new object or event, something that cannot be explained as the continuation of a preceding series and in terms of what is already known. What Arendt calls "the problem of the new," however, is more than an epistemological question about how we have knowledge of particulars. The problem of the new is a political question about how we, members of democratic communities, can affirm human freedom as a political reality in a world of objects and events whose causes and effects we can neither control nor predict with certainty. Arendt captures the difficulty we have in so affirming: "Whenever we are confronted with something frighteningly new, our first impulse is to recognize it in

a blind and uncontrolled reaction strong enough to coin a new word; our second impulse seems to be to regain control by denying that we saw anything new at all, by pretending that something similar is already known to us; only a third impulse can lead us back to what we saw and knew in the beginning. It is here that true [political] understanding begins."[7] At stake in political judgment is trying to be at home in a world composed of relations and events not of our own choosing, without succumbing to various forms of fatalism or determinism, whose other face is the idea of freedom as sovereignty.

Arendt holds that precisely whatever is not an object of knowledge is an occasion for developing the critical aspects of the faculty of judgment itself. It is in cases where determinate judgment strains or fails that true judgment begins. In cases where a concept is not given, the harmony of the faculties that obtains in a judgment is no longer under the legislation of the understanding (i.e., the faculty of concepts), but they attain a free accord. In the "free play of the faculties" imagination is no longer bound to the logic of recognition, which requires that it re-produce absent objects in accordance with the concept-governed linear temporality of the understanding. Imagination, when it is considered in its freedom - nothing compels us to consider it as such - is productive and spontaneous, not merely re-productive of what is already known, but generative of new forms and figures.

Foregrounding the productive role of the imagination in the faculty of judgment, I at once take up and depart from Arendt's own unfinished project to develop a theory of political judgment. Despite her heavy reliance on Kant's third *Critique*, she never really considered the imagination in its freedom, for she never thought of it as anything more than reproductive. Arendt's limited view of imagination is all the more curious when we recognize that the

reproductive imagination is bound to the faculty of the understanding and thus to concepts in a way that is difficult to square with her own vigorous refusal of cognition as the task of political judgment. Such neglect of the free play of imagination is one reason why Arendt's reflections on judging have lent themselves to both the appropriation and criticism of thinkers like Habermas, for whom validity looms as the single unanswered question that threatens to render her entire account incoherent. Arendt does have an answer to the question of validity that preoccupies her critics, but with one crucial caveat: by contrast with them she does not think that validity in itself is the all-important problem or task for political judgment - the affirmation of human freedom is.

In sections of the paper that I am unable to present due to time constraints, I show that Arendt refigures the validity that is appropriate to democratic politics as unthinkable apart from plurality. For her critics, validity is tied to the impartiality achieved through the separation of particular from general interests - but what remains is a form of interest nonetheless, only now this interest is said to be rational and universal in a non-transcendental sense. What Arendt understands by impartiality is different; it is akin to what Kant means when he says that concepts cannot play any role in an aesthetic judgment because they introduce interest, that is, the pleasure or liking we connect with an object's ability to serve an end. Concepts are to be excluded because they entangle judgments in an economy of use and the causal nexus.

As no concept determines the formation of a judgment according to Arendt, such formation cannot entail - not in the first place - the subject's relation to the object, which defines cognitive judgments. Rather, the relation to the object is mediated through the subject's relation to the standpoints of other subjects or, more

precisely, by taking the viewpoints of others on the same object into account. Arendt describes this as "representative thinking": "I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not."[8]

Imagination mediates: it moves neither above perspectives, as if they were something to transcend in the name of pure objectivity, nor at the same level as those perspectives, as if they were identities in need of our recognition. Rather, imagination enables "being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not."

To unpack this curious formulation of enlarged thinking let us consider the special art upon which it is based, what Arendt calls "training the imagination to go visiting" (*LKPP*, 43). Commenting on this art of imaginatively occupying the standpoints of other people, Iris Marion Young argues that it assumes a reversibility in social positions that denies structured relations of power and ultimately difference. "Dialogue participants are able to take account of the perspective of others because they have heard those perspectives expressed," writes Young, not because "the person judging imagines what the world looks like from other perspectives."[9] Likewise, Lisa Disch and Ronald Beiner insist that enlarged thought must be based in *actual* dialogue, not *imaginative* dialogue. We could qualify this critique and say that imagination is no substitute for hearing other perspectives but nonetheless necessary because, empirically speaking, we cannot

possibly hear all relevant perspectives. To do so, however, would be to accept the conception of imagination implicit in the critique, namely, that this faculty is at best a stand in for real objects, including the actual opinions of other people, and at worst a distortion of those objects, in accordance with the interests of the subject exercising imagination.

In contrast to the emphasis on actual dialogue oriented towards mutual understanding in a "discourse ethics," Arendt invokes imagination to develop reference to a third perspective from which one attempts to see from other standpoints, but at a distance. Arendt does not discount the importance of actual dialogue any more than did Kant, but, again like Kant, she emphasizes the unique position of *outsideness* from which we judge objects and events, judge them outside the economy of use and the causal nexus. "Being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not" is the position achieved not when, understanding another person, I yield my private to the general interest, but when I look at the world from multiple standpoints (not identity positions) to which I am always something of an outsider and also something of an outsider to my self as an acting being. This is the position of the spectator that Arendt describes in her Kant lectures. The spectator is the one who, through the use of imagination, can reflect on the whole in a disinterested manner, that is, a manner free not simply from private interest but from interest *tout court*, which is to say from any standard of utility whatsoever. Were the imagination merely reproductive and concept-governed, however (as Arendt herself seems to assume or at least never questions), it might be possible to attain the impartiality of the general interest. But would one be poised to apprehend objects and events outside the economy of use and the causal nexus - to apprehend them in their freedom?

Being so poised Kant could express enthusiasm about the world-historical event of the French Revolution, though from the standpoint of a moral acting being, Kant said, he would have to condemn it. From the standpoint of the spectator, however, the Revolution inspired in him a sense of "hope," as Arendt writes, by "opening up new horizons for the future" (*LKPP*, 56). It indicated what cannot be cognized but must be exhibited: human freedom.

The freedom-affirming judgment of the spectator "does not tell one how *to act*" (*LKPP*, 44), writes Arendt of Kant's enthusiasm. Only where the imagination is not restrained by a concept (given by the understanding) or the moral law (given by reason) can such a judgment come to pass. In free play, the imagination is no longer in the service of the application of concepts. To judge objects and events in their freedom expands our sense of community, not because it tells us what is justified or what we should do, but because it alters our sense of what is real, communicable.

Judging is a way of constructing and discovering community and its limits, but this does not mean that it would or ought to translate into a blueprint for political action. Contrary to what critics claim, Arendt in no way turns her back on the *vita active* or denies the importance of judging for politics. Rather, she refuses to define this activity in terms of the production of a normative basis for political action. Spectators do not produce judgments that can then serve as *principles* for action or for other judgments; they create the *space* in which the objects of political judgment, the actors and actions themselves, can appear, and thus alter our sense of what belongs in the common world.

If the world is the space in which things become public, then judging is a practice that alters what we will count as such. "The judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such

objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not the actors and the makers. And this critic and spectator sits in every actor (*LKPP*, 63);" "spectator" is not another person, but simply a different mode of relating to, or being in, the common world. This is a Copernican turn in the relationship of action to judgment: without the judging spectators and the artifacts of judgment action would vanish without a trace - it would not be a world-building activity. Arendt attributes this turn to Kant, but it is Hannah Arendt herself who claims, in her idiosyncratic reading of Kant, that it is the judging activity of the spectators that creates the public space, creates it as a space of freedom.

By contrast with Arendt, Kant intimates that the transformation of the public space involves not only the judgment of the spectators but the creative activity of the artist and the formative power of productive imagination, the ability to present objects in new, unfamiliar ways - what he calls "genius." In his discussion of "aesthetic ideas" Kant describes the imagination as "very mighty when it creates, as it were, another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it" (*CJ*, §49, p. 182). Indeed, "we may even restructure experience," adds Kant, "[and] in this process *we feel our freedom* from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical [i.e., reproductive] use of the imagination)" (ibid., emphasis added). This faculty of presentation "prompts so much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate. The imagination at work in the exhibition of aesthetic ideas, Kant writes, "expands the concept itself in an unlimited way" (*CJ*, §49). If concepts are not so much excluded as expanded in an indefinite way, this has consequences for how we think about our own political or aesthetic activity.

This concept-transforming activity of the imagination is not confined to genius. The imagination is "in free play" when we judge reflectivity, not only when we create new objects of judgment. Consider a text like the *Declaration of Sentiments*, written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and signed by a host of other women's rights advocates in 1848 at Seneca Falls. This text puts forward the judgment that men and women are created equal and therefore entitled to equal political rights. Projected into the public space, such a document is an imaginative "object," which stimulates the imagination of judging spectators and expands their sense of what is communicable, what they will count as part of the common world. Like a work of art, such a document is potentially defamiliarizing: working with what is communicable (e.g., the idea, put forward in the *Declaration of Independence*, that all men are created equal), it expands our sense of what we can communicate. Positing the agreement of all ("we hold these truths to be self-evident"), the Declaration of Sentiments creatively (re)presents the concept of equality in a way that, to cite Kant on productive imagination again, "quickens the mind by opening up for it a view" (*CJ*, §49), which is excluded by every logical presentation of the concept of equality.

We miss this creative expansion of the concept whenever we talk about the logical extension of something like equality or rights. The original concept of political equality, after all, is a determinate concept, historically constituted in relation to white, propertied male citizens. The *Declaration of Sentiments* did not simply apply this concept like a rule to a new particular (women). Rather, it exhibited the idea of equality much like an aesthetic idea: "a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which . . . no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate," to cite Kant again. Thus the "thought" that such a presentation "prompts"

always exceeds the terms of the concept; "it expands the concept itself in an unlimited way." This expansion is not logical but imaginative: we create new relations between things that have none (e.g., between the concept of equality and the relations between the sexes, or between the rights of man and the sexual division of labor). Every extension of a political concept always involves an imaginative opening up of the world that allows us to see and articulate relations between things that have none (in any necessary, logical sense), to create relations that are external to their terms. Political relations are always external to their terms: they involve not so much the ability to subsume particulars under concepts, but the ability to see or forge new connections.

The imagination, considered in its freedom, opens a *question* of community that cannot be settled by a practice of politics centered on the exchange of proofs. Rejecting a consensus won by proofs, Arendt's point is not that political judgments must eschew all cognitive claims. It is rather to remind us that our relation to others and to the world is based on something other than knowing. "Knowledge is based on acknowledgment," observes Wittgenstein, that is, on a mode of counting something as something, which is the condition of knowledge, but also doing something in relation to what one knows. To say, for example, that a political issue like gay marriage calls for our judgment is not to foreclose cognitive questions. It is rather to say that a cognitive judgment of a thing's existence (i.e., its function or ability to satisfy an end) is not what we are being called upon to make, anymore than a botanist, as Kant says, is called upon to explain the flower as a reproductive organ of a plant when he declares the flower beautiful. One can well know such things about plants, just as one can well know certain things about nonheterosexual practices. To judge aesthetically or politically, however, requires that we count

what we know differently, count the flower as beautiful quite apart from its use, count non-heteronormative sexual practices as part of the common world, quite apart from whatever social function they might serve. And that requires imagination. Contrary to her critics' charge, Arendt's critique of cognitive claims in the political realm was not, never make a cognitive judgment when you judge politically; it was, do not confuse a cognitive judgment for judging politically. Something else is required, for a political judgment reveals not some property of the object but something of political significance about the one who makes it.

What we affirm in a political judgment is experienced not as a cognitive commitment to a set of rationally agreed upon precepts (as they are encoded in, say, a constitution - though it *can* be experienced as that too) but as pleasure, as shared sensibility. "We feel our freedom," as Kant put it, when we judge aesthetically or, as Arendt shows, politically. If the pleasure that obtains in a judgment arises not out of the immediate apprehension of an object but out of reflection (i.e., it arises in relation to nothing other than the judgment itself), then we are thrown back on ourselves and our own practice: we take pleasure in what we hold (e.g., that these truths are self-evident). *What gives us pleasure is how we judge, that is to say, that we judge objects and events in their freedom.* We don't have to hold these truths to be self-evident any more than we have to hold men and women equal or the rose beautiful; nothing compels us. There is nothing necessary in what we hold. That we do so hold is an expression of our freedom. In the judgment, we affirm our freedom and discover the nature and limits of what we hold in common. This is the simple but crucial lesson to be learned from Arendt's account of political judgment.

---

[1] Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement : Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 58. Portions of this essay are forthcoming in Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago University Press, 2005) and in Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Aesthetic Judgment and the Public Sphere in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* (forthcoming 2004).

[2] Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13. Hereafter cited in the text as *LKPP*.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), (*CJ*, §32, p.145). Hereafter cited in the text as *CJ* with section and page numbers.

[4] Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," in *Hannah Arendt, Critical Essays*, eds. Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 225. For a similar argument, see Albrecht Wellmer, "Hannah Arendt on Judgment: The Unwritten Doctrine of Reason," in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, ed. Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedlesky (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 165-181, 169.

[5] Ronald Beiner, "Interpretive Essay: Hannah Arendt on Judging," in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 36.

[6] Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 188-189. Benhabib finds a "normative lacuna in Arendt's thought" and the turn to the third,

rather than the second, *Critique* to be one more "disturbing" example of Arendt's refusal or failure to provide the "normative dimension of the political" (Ibid., 193, 194).

[7] Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954,* ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 307-327, 325, n. 7. "The loss of [inherited] standards," Arendt observes, "is only a catastrophe for the moral [and political] world when one assumes that individuals are not capable of judging things in themselves [...]; one cannot expect of them anything more than the application of known rules." Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik?*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1993), 22. Hereafter cited in the text as *WIP*. All translations are my own.

[8] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 227-264, 241.

[9] Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics*, Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky eds. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 205-228, 225