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# *Practical Foundations for Political Judgment: Arendt on Action and World*

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Critics of Hannah Arendt's conception of political judgment typically either neglect the complex connections between her theory of judgment and the rest of her substantive political theory or wrongly assume that such foundations for morality and judgment as might be consistent with Arendtian democratic politics may be derived only from her nostalgic and not altogether accurate account of Greek politics. I argue that a much different political ethic may be found in Arendt's work: Arendt's theory of action and concept of "world" provide criteria that may serve as practical foundations for making political judgments. Conceiving and exploring Arendt's theory in this way provide a clearer and more useful way of thinking about the theoretical and practical problems associated with democratic politics and political judgment in a postmodern or post-Nietzschean world characterized by the absence of universal standards or foundations.

## INTRODUCTION: ARENDT AND JUDGMENT

Nearly two decades after her death, Arendt's intended but unwritten treatise on judgment continues to fascinate readers intrigued by her conception of democratic politics. What Arendt might have written about the faculty of judgment can only be inferred and reconstructed from posthumously collected lecture notes, suggestive references in works addressed primarily to other topics, and various other fragments. Arendt repeatedly insists that human beings need to think, judge, and act, but rejects the metaphysical tradition which formerly was held to provide orientation and guidance for these activities. Yet she never provides a detailed discussion of how a political agent ought to orient or comport herself in the absence of authoritative standards. The missing theory of judgment may have spoken to this problem and seems, moreover, to be at the nexus of a number of other apparent problems in Arendt's thought.

This part of Arendt's work has not wanted for speculation, commentary, and attempted reconstruction. Steinberger's (1990) attempt to illuminate Arendtian judgment is one of the more recent of such projects and is illustrative of both the difficulties involved and the potential rewards. Steinberger (1990, 809) suggests that understanding this particular mental faculty is necessary not only for making

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sense of Arendt's account of political action, but also for assessing the impact of what he calls the "mood" inspired by Arendt's political theory. Steinberger sees this Arendtian mood as widespread and exceedingly influential in recent political theory, having inspired or influenced some of the work of Sheldon Wolin, Benjamin Barber, John Gunnell, William Connolly, and Hanna Pitkin, among other important contemporary theorists. This mood

embraces the notion of politics as a distinctive and inherently valuable kind of enterprise having intellectual properties peculiar to it and irreducible, as such, to the rules and principles of logic, dogmatic metaphysics, or the natural and technical sciences. It is, moreover, a mood sharply different from the more traditional, rationalistic disposition of those academic philosophers who have chosen to pursue, for example, questions of justice by seeking to generate logically sound deductions from presumably uncontroversial and widely held premises. (Steinberger 1990, 815–16)

Steinberger's ascription of these concerns to something as nebulous as an Arendtian "mood" is in some ways problematic, but Arendt's theory of judgment would clearly have important implications for a number of vital issues facing contemporary, post-Nietzschean political theory.

Unfortunately, the conception of judgment that may be inferred or extrapolated from Arendt's writings and lectures seems to be deficient. Arendt clearly intended to base her theory on Kant's noncognitivist faculty of aesthetic judgment, which forswears the objective validation of truth-claims in favor of subjective consensus and community standards and norms. Steinberger (1990) and Beiner (1984) follow Gadamer in seeing Kantian aesthetics as radically subjectivized. To the extent that a theory of political judgment is based on Kantian aesthetics, it also participates in and suffers from this radical subjectivization.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Arendt's theory "must be fundamentally noncognitivist" and her faculty of judgment "cannot be a matter of knowledge" (Steinberger 1990, 818). Beiner looks to Aristotle and Habermas to restore some measure of substantive moral–political content to Arendtian judgment. This is too close to relativism and nihilism for Steinberger, who sees Arendt as rather too smitten with notions of ambiguity, ineffability, and flux to provide a coherent account of distinctively political judgment. In the end, he seems to suggest, Arendt leads us not to "clarity and light" but to "a kind of toleration and resignation in the face of an intractable, unfathomable, and meaningless world" (1990, 819–20).

Discerning as much of his analysis is, there are some important problems in Steinberger's interpretation, and not the least of these are the strict dichotomies set up between cognitive and noncognitive modes of rationality, and between cognitive rationality and nihilism. At its base, there surely is a noncognitive aspect or element to Kant's aesthetic and Arendt's political judgment, but neither are

<sup>1</sup>For a related but quite different argument, see Villa 1992. Arguing that Arendt advocates an aestheticized, Nietzschean politics that is "beyond good and evil," Villa seems to see this radical subjectivization as a strength of Arendt's position.

purely noncognitive and both require subjects to adduce intersubjectively valid reasons in support of their judgments. And at least since Aristotle explored and developed the Greek concept of *phronesis*, we have had available a description of a substantially noncognitive intellectual faculty which could take the highly contingent nature of the realm of human affairs into consideration without succumbing to nihilism. But just as Aristotle's *phronesis* was associated with and based on his conception of *eudaimonia*, his theory of education, and his teleological, Logos-centered metaphysics, so too does Arendt's *judgment* need its "foundations" and boundary concepts.

Steinberger's central point, however, is that Arendt's largely Kantian and aesthetic conception of political judgment lacks precisely the sort of norms or standards which might serve as foundations or limits for making judgments. Arendt theorizes in a radically historicized, antimetaphysical, post-Nietzschean tradition, where such foundations must be understood as no more than conventional or contextual. Yet, as Arendt tells us herself (1982, 76), judgment requires a *tertium quid* or *tertium comparationis*, a third "something" to facilitate comparison or serve as a standard. Rejecting Kantian universalizing as well as the resources of the metaphysical tradition,<sup>2</sup> Arendt (1982, 73ff) argues that judgment as such is possible because of the human capacity to make imaginatively present exemplary people and objects. Thus, for example, when we make a judgment related to the quality of courage, we may hold in our mind's eye the exemplary courage of Achilles (Arendt 1982, 77ff). But Arendt says little in her lectures, or in her treatises on thinking and willing, about how we actually choose our exemplars, how we might distinguish between better and worse examples, and so forth.

It is therefore tempting to look for the missing foundation or *tertium quid* in the context of her broader discussions of politics and the political tradition. Political judgment is associated with the political tradition (as opposed to the metaphysical or philosophical tradition) Arendt sought to recover, clarify, and defend. Standards for judgment may be provided by or entailed in that tradition.

This strategy may have merit, but Arendt's highly romanticized vision of Greek politics seems rather dubious as a source for what amounts to a political ethic. Critics have properly chided Arendt for minimizing the often violent and conflictual character of Greek politics and for seeming to present a vision of politics devoid of any acceptable ethic or concern for justice. But these qualities of Greek politics do not comprise the necessary value-commitments of the political tradition, which indeed provides other, more basic resources to orient judgment. The most important of these are Arendt's theory of action and her concept of "world," which together constitute the existential underpinning of Arendtian democratic politics.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Arendt (1978a, 10–12; 15; 30; 110). Indeed, as several of the essays included in *Between Past and Future* (1977) make clear, Arendt believes that previous forms of religion, authority, and tradition have become increasingly obsolete in the modern world.

The theory of judgment does not and cannot stand alone; rather, it depends on, and is depended on by, the other elements of Arendt's political theory. But Arendt's understanding of politics is itself laden with problems, such as susceptibility to charges of moral vacuity, if one focuses simply on the Greek preoccupation with glory apparently extolled by Arendt in many of her writings.<sup>3</sup> A different and more defensible ethic may be found in the political tradition.

In the following section, I argue that Arendt's preferred method of exposition by distinction has misled a number of her commentators and critics, and that this method has set up a number of opposing conceptual archetypes (e.g., *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, actor and spectator) which need to be reintegrated if we are to make sense of her theory of judgment. Indeed, as the third section argues, a coherent account of political judgment must draw as much from the theory of action as it does from the life of the mind. But the principle inspiring action, and the ethical foundation for action, is not desire for glory so much as it is love for what Arendt called the world. Arendt's *world* provides not only space and orientation for action, but also substantive moral content. Political judgment, I shall argue, must be understood in close coordination with these expressly political concepts and doctrines. By viewing Arendt's theory in this way, a number of apparent problems and difficulties can be circumvented. Exploring and reconceptualizing Arendt's work in this way yields important insights into the more general problems associated with post-Nietzschean, antifoundationalist theories of political judgment and their various practical implications.

#### REINTEGRATING ARENDT'S CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

Many of Arendt's legion of critics and commentators have argued that there was a decisive shift or turn of some sort in Arendt's thinking. Usually, this shift is identified with *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978) and/or Arendt's appeal to Kantian aesthetics in her formulation of a theory of judgment. At least purportedly, Arendt here gives up, or moves away from, her earlier concern with the unique nature of politics and political action.

Thus Beiner (1982), for example, argues that Arendt presents her readers with what amount to two theories of political judgment, one appropriate to political agents and the other more closely associated with historians and other storytellers. Instead of examining judgment as a constitutive feature of political life as such, Beiner (1982, 93) tells us that the Kant lectures indicate that Arendt had begun to regard judgment as the capacity and prerogative of the essentially solitary and

<sup>3</sup>As will be discussed in more detail later, Arendt places a great deal of emphasis on the self-revelatory nature of action. Through action, human beings escape from the ongoing and essentially meaningless processes of biological life and socialization (1958, chaps. 3, 5; 1963, 137), and are free to define themselves. Noble actions are deserving of glory and inspire stories (1958, 154–59). A large part of the Greek fascination with politics, at least as Arendt describes it, centers on the hope that by freely speaking and acting in public an individual could disclose his unique identity, earn fame and glory, inspire stories which might survive him, and thus participate in the immortality of the *polis* (1972, 165).

retrospective thinker. Her alleged aim in making this shift was to find a philosophical affirmation of worldly affairs and a means of saving human freedom and dignity (Arendt 1982, 94). Where the central characters of Arendt's earlier works had been political agents living in community and deliberating about what they might accomplish, by 1971 these political agents are superseded by the solitary spectator observing and reflecting about human affairs:

Instead of being conceived in terms of the deliberations of political actors deciding on possible courses of future action (an activity which Arendt subsequently identifies with projects of will), judgment now comes to be defined as reflection on the past, on what is already given. (1982, 109)

Arendt's theory of judgment is more historically oriented than it is political, and is thus of presumably limited usefulness in explaining and guiding the words and deeds of the "man of action." The other (more political) conception of judgment is left in rudimentary form but can be glimpsed in some of the earlier essays.

Bernstein is even more insistent than Beiner on this point. He decries what he considers to be a "flagrant contradiction" in Arendt's work between thinking and acting (Bernstein 1986, 221). Judgment is both a specifically political activity and the mental activity of the spectator, who seeks to find the meaning of human affairs, as it were, from the outside. Judgment is simultaneously the "faculty par excellence of those who participate and engage in action and the faculty of non-participating spectators" (Bernstein 1986, 221). What are we to make of the earlier arguments for the ontological uniqueness of action, he asks, when the actor and the spectator are now seemingly combined and conflated?

On the other side, we find Vollrath (1977, 161) arguing that Arendt's thought is characterized by a deep and fundamental unity. And Young-Bruehl, while conceding that Arendt's work is not systematic, argues that it nevertheless forms a "coherent whole" (1982b, 302). Arendt, however, seems to have regarded the later work on judgment and the other mental faculties as somehow different, less political, and more philosophical than much of her earlier work. As she told Hans Jonas while she was preparing her Gifford lectures (which were the basis of *The Life of the Mind*), "I have done my bit in politics, no more of that; from now on, and for what is left, I will deal with trans-political things" (Jonas 1977, 27).

Thus, the specific nature and consequences of this *Kehre*, if such it was, remain mysterious and contentious. Most of the confusion is the result of Arendt's characteristic insistence on developing opposing conceptual archetypes and pushing her distinctions as far as possible. As is well known, Arendt's approach was to explore political and philosophical issues by carefully examining distinctions between concepts, and exploring their history. As Mary McCarthy once put it:

Very close to the roots of Hannah Arendt's thinking is the *distinguo*: I distinguish this from that. I distinguish labor from work. I distinguish fame from reputation.<sup>4</sup> (Hill 1978, 337–38)

<sup>4</sup>Both McCarthy's remarks and Arendt's response were made at a conference on "The Work of Hannah Arendt" held in Toronto in 1972. I quote from excerpts of the transcript of this conference published in Hill (1978, 337–38). On this point see also Arendt's discussion of the importance of making distinctions in "What is Authority?" (1977b, 95–97).



Arendt also acknowledges this “*distinguo*” as her methodology or technique and describes it as part of her Aristotelian heritage:

I always start anything by saying, “A and B are not the same.” And this of course comes right out of Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> (Hill 1978, 338)

By exploring distinctions Arendt reminds us of the various implications of the ways in which we talk, of what our words once meant, and of the forms of life and ways of looking at the world to which these words once referred. The specifically philological or etymological aspects of this technique no doubt derive in considerable part from her teacher Heidegger, who used the same sort of analysis as a means of circumventing what he saw as the systematic distortions that Aristotelian preoccupations with “substantiality” and other alleged philosophical misuses have wreaked on our language and ways of thinking.<sup>6</sup> Like Heidegger, Arendt is concerned with the distortions of the metaphysical tradition, but she is preoccupied with what they have meant for our understanding of the traditional form of life known as politics. Again not unlike Heidegger, she makes her case by appealing to a different experience of the world to which we might compare our own experiences. She dissects the ways in which we think, speak, and live, and traces their origins and histories, with the aim of showing us aspects of ourselves which were previously hidden, forgotten, or poorly understood. She shows us forgotten ways of understanding the world which once again may be made conscious, and lost forms of life which once again may be resurrected, at least as possibilities.

But she did not always succeed in putting back together that which she so carefully dissected with her distinctions. As a result, in place of a vision of human life and citizenship that integrates the various activities and faculties of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* into a coherent whole, Arendt leaves us with puzzle pieces that have to be fit together. All of the various activities and faculties she discusses are components of the human condition, aspects of our identities as human beings.

Beiner, Bernstein, and a host of others consider it important to ask whether and to what extent Arendt’s conception of judgment participates in the *vita activa*, or whether it is confined to the various mental activities and faculties that comprise the *vita contemplativa*. They fail to see, and this is partly Arendt’s fault, that this ancient distinction is ultimately misleading. The life of the mind (or at least its constituent faculties and activities) and the life of action are best thought of not as “lives” at all, but rather as dimensions or moments of human existence. As such, and very clearly in Arendt’s work, they are interrelated in any number of complex ways. In her unceasing efforts to make and maintain important and necessary

<sup>5</sup> See note 4.

<sup>6</sup> In form and structure, Heidegger’s arguments (e.g., 1962, 2–3; 122–34) are sometimes strikingly similar to many of Arendt’s arguments. He is also convinced, not unlike Arendt, that it is “the ultimate business of philosophy . . . to preserve the *force of the most elemental words* in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from levelling them off” (1962, 262; emphasis in original).

distinctions, Arendt rather misleadingly categorizes and arranges in various hierarchies all sorts of human activities and faculties, including the two traditional ways of life. *The Human Condition* reverses their conventional hierarchical order, but retains the distinction itself. But this distinction can best be thought of as a kind of heuristic device; it enables us to see more clearly some vitally important differences among human activities. But it cannot bear more weight than this, and ought not be pressed to do so.

Similarly, in explaining the role that representative thinking plays in judgment, Arendt (1978a, 58–59) employs a related distinction between the acting (and judging) political agent and the judging spectator. Judging is not only a political capacity—indeed, it is central to the very process by which human beings come to terms with reality. Through the faculty of thought, human beings search for meaning in the stories left behind by actions and events. Through the faculty of judgment, we take a stand with respect to the people, events, objects, and stories we reflect upon.<sup>7</sup> The meanings we find thus originate “in the very process of living together as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer” (Arendt 1953, 376). By supplying meaning, thinking confers dignity on human beings in a world which otherwise would be devoid of meaning. It reconciles us to the arbitrariness of our own existence, to the uncertainty and contingency of even our own actions. The faculty of thought preserves human dignity by explicating the human meaning of events, especially those which have exemplary validity and those which were lost causes. It allows us to go on living with tragedy and in a tragic world. By making judgments, we take a stand with respect to what we have seen, heard, and reflected upon. This quality of judgment—the necessity of taking a stand—seems indispensable not only to historians and storytellers, but also to agents participating in democratic politics. But here one seems to run afoul of Arendt’s distinction between actors and spectators.

The spectator has a number of advantages over the actor in interpreting the meanings of the actor’s deeds and making judgments. First of all, meaning rises out of such deeds “after the action itself has come to an end” (Arendt 1977a, 78). Even more important, the perspective of the actor on what she does is inherently limited. Relatively speaking, only the spectator sees the whole, while the actor sees only her part, and has a perspective that is partial virtually by definition. “Hence withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game is the *sine qua non* of all judgment” (Arendt 1982, 55).<sup>8</sup> Arendt points out that this notion is “as old as the hills”:<sup>9</sup> Only the spectator is completely disinterested and thus capable of taking an impartial perspective. The spectator is fascinated with the

<sup>7</sup>This is the meaning of the epigram from Cato with which Arendt intended to begin her treatise on judging (1982, ii): *Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni*. (The victorious causes please the gods, but the defeated ones please Cato.) By making judgments we also decide with whom we stand.

<sup>8</sup>See also 1978a, 76; 92–94. The necessary price one pays for understanding what one has seen is withdrawal from direct participation in it (1978a, 93).

<sup>9</sup>According to Arendt, the traditional superiority of the contemplative life rests at least partly on something like this notion. She thus quotes Pythagoras:



spectacle itself, and is therefore better qualified than any of the interested parties to interpret and pass judgment upon its meaning.

But here again we ought not to push the distinction too far. We all are both actors and spectators; we act, we observe, we continually interpret the meaning of actions and events, even if we ourselves at times are profoundly involved and interested in them. Many of the same qualities and capacities that make for good retrospective judgment are also required for forward-looking political judgments. The spectator and the actor cannot be considered as fundamentally opposed archetypes; rather, to use the hermeneutic metaphor, living and acting in the world require us to tack back and forth from one to another. In more Arendtian terminology, we need to understand "actor" and "spectator" as different but closely related moments in an expanded *vita activa*. Freedom comes from our capacity for action, but effective or well-conceived action depends on our capacity to understand and judge. This is why Arendt considers judgment to be the "most political" of the intellectual capacities.

Thinking, willing, and judging are all connected to action in various ways. They are distinct activities in some respects, and it is sometimes useful to look at them in this way. They each have certain nonpolitical qualities and aspects, but in some ways they are all profoundly related to politics and action. All are related aspects or moments of human existence, and Arendt recognizes them as such, at least implicitly. Thus, for example, one could say that the critical distance of the spectator is necessary for enlarged thinking, good judgment, and therefore good or prudent or well-conceived action. Conversely, it is also true that the sheer experience of acting is necessary for the spectator to really understand the meaning of actions.

Virtually all of Arendt's work points toward this sort of reintegration, but this is largely obscured because she was too much in the thrall of her own distinctions. Perhaps most of all, she was enchanted by the ancient categories of *bios politikos* and *bios theoretikos*, *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. Arendt (1987, 29) accepts or assumes the traditional distinction,<sup>10</sup> but reverses the traditional hierarchical order. Her engagement was with a philosophical tradition which had turned away from politics. She sees and protests the concomitant devaluation and distortion of the political tradition, but she never really questions the distinction that is at the root of it, except perhaps implicitly.

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Life is like a festival; just as some come to the festival to compete, some to ply their trade, but the best people come as spectators (*theatai*), so in life the slavish men go hunting for fame (*doxa*) or gain, the philosophers for truth. (1982, 55; 1978a, 93)

She also points out that Cicero similarly likened philosophers to those who came to great games and festivals, neither for glory nor to buy and sell, but "to closely watch what was done and how it was done" (1977d, 219).

<sup>10</sup> As Habermas points out, she never lets go of "the classic distinction between theory and practice" (1985, 186).

Both the actor and the spectator make use of judgment; the human capacity that mediates and distinguishes between the “moments” called *spectator* and *actor* may be thought of variously as *prohairesis* or will or choice (although, as always, important distinctions between these concepts need to be remembered), the faculty by which we take a stand with respect to what we have seen. In less precise but nevertheless Arendtian terms, this is the capacity to insert oneself into the world, to appear in one’s unique identity, to say what is or what appears from one’s own perspective, to begin new processes, and to take one’s share of responsibility for the world. But how can judgment be integrated more fully and thoroughly into Arendt’s understanding of politics and action?

### ACTION, FREEDOM, AND JUDGMENT

Political action in Arendt’s sense implies and requires freedom. Yet our judgments, on which our actions are based, are inextricably connected to the standards, values, and tastes of our communities. The political agent is always situated in a particular historical period, culture, community, language, class, gender, and so forth. Our judgments and actions take place against this backdrop, which in turn gives them (at least substantially) their meaning. But contrary to what is sometimes argued, the various dimensions of our socialization and “situated-ness” do not wholly determine our actions and choices, nor do they by themselves constitute the whole of our subjectivity. In Arendt’s view, this is a fairly common fallacy resulting from a lack of awareness that freedom has its locus somewhere other than thought. What counts most is our concrete experience of freedom and choice, not what some thinker has said about them (Arendt 1978b, 5; 1977c, 144).<sup>11</sup>

The problem is that every event seems to come trailing antecedent causes that retrospectively seem to have determined that event. In principle, sufficient knowledge of these antecedent causes would have allowed an observer to predict that (or any) event. Perfect knowledge of all causes in principle would provide perfect knowledge of all events. In this way (and in contradiction to our often anxious experience of making choices), when psychological motivations and psychochemical reactions, for example, are viewed as causes, freedom disappears. Seemingly, *all* events are the results of processes of various kinds, are in principle deducible, and, therefore, are in a manner of speaking, determined.

Arendt insists that this is largely an illusion. The world is a vast sea of causes such that almost everything that does happen seems in retrospect to have happened of necessity. But while events do illuminate their own past in this way, it is

<sup>11</sup>See also Jacobitti’s discussion of this issue (1988, 53ff). Arendt argues that this fallacy results not from error but from a true semblance or deceptive illusion (1978a, 38–39) inherent in creatures who experience the world via human sense organs and intellectual faculties. Such true semblances “are inherent in the paradoxical condition of a living being that, though itself part of the world of appearances, is in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it” (1978a, 45).

not the case that they are necessarily deducible from their apparent causes (Arendt 1953, 388). The factuality of reality makes it appear to have existed in the mode of potentiality, in a system of causes that could have only one outcome, prior to its actualization (Arendt 1978b, 30–31). The modern expression of this proclivity for seeking and seeing retrospective causality misleads people into thinking that they are caught up in historical or suprahistorical processes which they did not initiate and from which they cannot escape. *Geist* or *eros* or Progress or the relations of production (or, more recently, power-laden discourses and grand narratives) become the motivator of human history, the dog that wags the human tail. Human beings become the mere predicates of these processes.

It is our capacity for action that saves human beings from the futility and pointlessness of causally determined natural processes. As Shelon Wolin (1977, 97) puts it, without this capacity there is only “the natural rhythm of coming-to-be and passing away.” Through action, at least as Arendt conceives it, human beings can interrupt natural processes and begin something new. We are capable of taking the initiative and doing something that is wholly novel and therefore impossible to predict on the basis of antecedent causes. As such, action has about it a certain miraculous quality (Arendt 1958, 246) which derives ultimately from the sheer fact that human beings are by their nature “beginners.”<sup>12</sup> Through action we escape the relentless dialectic of cause and effect, and insert ourselves into the world (Arendt 1958, 176–77).

This is a crucial point for Arendt. Animals live their lives entirely under the sway of causality; all their activity reflects *what* they are. Their behavior reflects only natural necessity, the instinctual activities necessary to keep them and their species alive. This is also part of the nature of human beings. But human beings are not only *whats* but also *whos*. We each have an individual identity entirely different from that of every other human being who ever lived or will live. This unique identity realizes itself in the world through action, which is the virtual opposite of behavior (conceived of as adherence to routine or instinctual activity, which we share with every other living creature, and which is ultimately causally determined).

In this manner, Arendt’s conception of action thus does have a certain self-revelatory or even dramaturgical character. We show our selves—our unique identities—to other people. By acting in the world, we reveal our principles, our passions, our virtuosity, and our character. Each action discloses *who* one is (Arendt 1987, 39–40). We act because we want to appear in the world and make our mark on it, either by changing it somehow or preserving it or otherwise imposing ourselves on what otherwise would have been at least a somewhat different course of events. In so doing, we realize our freedom and unique identities.

But contrary to what is generally believed, and contrary to the appearance of certain passages in *The Human Condition*, Arendt does not claim either that action

<sup>12</sup> See Arendt (1987, 42).

must be agonal or heroic, or that all action and self-revelation are necessarily political. In Gerge Kateb's (1983, 8) interpretation, for example, Arendt insists that only in political action is a person revealed. This is one of many instances in which Arendt's preferred method of exposition by distinction misleads her readers. As we have seen, one of the distinguishing characteristics of action is that something of the unique identity of the agent is revealed. Arendt draws this distinction so sharply and insistently that it is easy to miss her declaration that self-disclosure "is implicit in everything somebody says or does," and that the self "can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity" (1958, 179). One can certainly reveal through word and deed who one is in the close, intimate circle of one's friends. Indeed, in the modern world, this is the only arena where most individuals feel comfortable doing so (Arendt 1968a, 24). Arendt herself never felt comfortable acting in public, preferring to reveal who she was only to her close friends (Hill 1979, 304; Young-Bruehl 1982a, 233) and in her writing.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Hana Pitkin (1981, 341ff) takes Arendt to task for developing a vision of politics and action which have no substantive political content. Specifically, Arendt's theory lacks any clear concern for justice. Without a substantive conception of justice, and concerned only with an agonal striving for glory, "Arendt's citizens begin to resemble posturing little boys clamoring for attention" (Pitkin 1981, 338). This "contemptible" doctrine reeks of anxious Athenian "ma-chismo." Pitkin reminds us that the content of politics is or should be justice:

Political life is not some leisure-time sport for aristocrats, in which they may cultivate their honor and display their prowess. It is the activity through which relatively large and permanent groups of people determine what they will collectively do, settle how they will live together, and decide their future, to whatever extent that is within human power . . . In deciding the perennial political question, "What shall we do?" we are inevitably deciding at the same time both what each of us will get, and who we, as a community, will be. (1981, 343–46)<sup>14</sup>

By banishing the economic concerns (and the pity) of "the social" from politics, Arendt is making action "pointless and arbitrary," if not entirely grotesque. Pitkin does not believe that this could have been Arendt's intention and offers an alternative account of politics similar in important respects to Arendt's but much more attuned to questions of justice.

It is not difficult to see how Pitkin comes by these views. Arendt (1958, 205–206, 180) tells us that "action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness." This greatness, moreover, lies "only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement." Action "needs for its full appearance the

<sup>13</sup>The role and nature of two of Arendt's own primary occupations, teaching and writing (especially of political theory), amount to a curious lacuna in Arendt's work. Writing a political treatise, for example, seems to partake of both action and work. But because writing leaves behind a tangible product, and because teaching does not take place in an environment of equality, they cannot be "action" strictly speaking. Here again, Arendt's insistence on sharp distinction creates confusions such that she herself can only declare that teaching and writing are "something else" (Hill 1979, 304).

<sup>14</sup>Pitkin develops this argument further in the last chapter of her *Fortune is a Woman* (1984).

shining brightness we once called glory.” As in Aristotle’s concept of *energeia*, action is an activity that pursues no end (is *ateleis*) and leaves nothing behind. It is entirely outside the category of means and ends, and exists only in its sheer actuality. An action’s meaning is exhausted, Arendt tells us, in its sheer performance (1958, 206–207). If the show, so to speak, is the thing, Pitkin’s interpretation seems unassailable. There seems little room indeed for social concerns and justice in Arendt’s vision of politics and action. All that matters is that our actions stand out and generate stories.

Arendt’s attempt to set out the unique characteristics of action, and to distinguish it more or less formally from all other activities, is again misleading, as is the too sharply drawn distinction between the political and the social. Actions always have specific substantive content. We do not simply “act”; rather, we perform “deeds.” When we talk, we always talk about something. But not just any acting together in public counts as action, as Arendt makes clear (1958, 203). Our authentic actions spring, she tells us, from our principles. These principles include honor and glory (which, depending on the *ethos* of the society, may be as closely related to striving for justice as anything else), but they may also include, for example, love of equality. Actions express the principles by which we have chosen to live our lives, whether these be justice and honor, or fear and hatred (Arendt 1977c, 152–53). They may be “about” social or economic issues, if that expresses what the agent is “about.” These principles are expressed in concrete, practical circumstances, and even, it seems, in the pursuit of particular ends. But it is not the pursuit of any special end (even justice), or ends in the abstract, that defines the special character of action, which must be understood in its formal or ontological dimension if we are to understand and recover freedom. Precisely this sets up a confusing tension between action *qua* performance and what appears to be a parallel and considerably different account in which action always has some substantive content.

But what sort of substantive content? Is there any sort of distinctive grounding for political action? Is there any sort of substantive ethical or cognitive foundation or orientation for political judgment? In fact, according to Arendt, political action is inherently connected to care for the world, not only for what the world thinks but for what the world will be like in the wake of one’s acting. Finding a theory of political judgment in Arendt requires us to combine her conception of judgment with her theory of action, but an important piece of the puzzle, the substantive ethical foundations of authentically political judgment, is still missing. This substantive grounding is provided by the doctrine of *amor mundi*.<sup>15</sup> And only when we appreciate the epistemological implications of this doctrine does the legitimacy of this particular form of foundationalism become apparent.

<sup>15</sup>See James Bernauer’s very interesting discussion of this doctrine. Bernauer calls this doctrine nothing less than a new form of “worldly faith” (1987, 18), although such an expression would probably have sounded strange to Arendt.

## CARE FOR THE WORLD

If political freedom is inseparable from action, and if the fundamental or most basic form of action is appearing before others in word and deed (and thus taking a stand of some sort and revealing some aspect of who one is), then human beings need a space in which to appear if they are to be free. This public space of appearances is closely associated with the extraordinarily difficult concept that Arendt calls “world.” The relationship, however, is rather complex; “world” is encountered in the public realm yet also gives the public realm its character and durability. For Arendt, the world is the entire pragmatic web of relationships in which human beings are caught up, the total interplay between people, things, and relationships. The world serves as a context and record for action, and it can also provide, as we shall see, an ethical foundation or orientation for political judgment.

World designates first of all the complex web of relationships in which human beings find themselves enmeshed. It provides the common framework that relates individuals to one another. This phenomenological commonality is stressed over and over by Arendt—because the world is something that is held in common by plural subjects, it provides a common point of orientation. Indeed, communication between diverse subjects is possible precisely because a world exists between human beings and serves as an enduring point of reference. The world simultaneously separates and relates human beings much in the way that a table separates and relates the individuals who gather around it (Arendt 1958, 52). The world provides orientation to those who hold it in common by giving them at least some common concerns and thereby a common language. We enter into this web of relationships or world when we are born and leave it when we die; its existence precedes our own and outlasts our brief sojourn in it (Arendt 1958, 55).

Arendt considered the pre-Socratic Greeks to have been the single people to have grasped best the significance of human plurality and perspectival consciousness, and of the role that a common world plays as both arena and reference point. It is this political epistemology as much as anything else that draws her to them:

[T]he Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view. In a sheer inexhaustible flow of arguments . . . the Greek learned to exchange his own viewpoint, his own “opinion” . . . with those of his fellow citizens. Greeks learned to *understand*—not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects. (1977a, 51, emphasis in original)

As this common point of reference, world is both a formal condition for political action and, in a very specific manner of speaking, its appropriate object.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>The world is the arena in which we judge and act, and also the object of our judgments and political deliberations. Action may be distinct from work in having no object outside of itself, but the world is the medium in which actions are performed and hence, in a slightly different sense, its object.



Clearly, however, it is also more than the object of action and cannot be maintained by action alone. The world

depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things. Without remembrance, and without the reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfillment and which makes it, indeed, as the Greeks held, the mother of all arts, the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality . . . and disappear as though they had never been. (1958, 95)

At least in part, the world consists of relatively enduring objects. These objects have significance and distinctive character because they represent the reification of otherwise fleeting thoughts and actions. This reification is itself not the province of action but of *work*.

Nevertheless, there is a close and special relationship between action and world. Political action is inherently connected to care for the world, not only for what the world thinks (the “glory” for which the Greeks strove) but for what the world will be like in the wake of one’s acting. One’s actions originate in the self and exemplify or manifest or embody one’s principles; they are not subservient to any practical end in the world. The fact that they may be, and likely will be, frustrated does not impugn the principle involved nor deny the freedom of the agent. Action is an ontological category, a way of being in the world irrespective of the unpredictable practical consequences of any particular action. In this respect, Arendt’s concept of action resembles the existentialist concept of the project.<sup>17</sup> On different levels, the project of the agent is pursued for its own sake, for the sake of the self, and for the sake of the world. Action has no object, strictly speaking, because its contingent nature is such that its consequences are unpredictable; yet we engage in it anyway, and for reasons that make no sense in terms of instrumental rationality.

What Arendt lacks is an account of how individuals come by and reflect on their principles, and of how such principles are expressed in action in a concrete world of particulars. This, I think, is part of what she wanted to provide in *The Life of the Mind*, although she never comprehensively describes the relationship between the active and contemplative life. This is the case because she was more concerned (as usual) with demonstrating the distinctiveness of the various component activities of each way of life. But the missing treatise on judgment surely would have done much to span the gap.

<sup>17</sup>George Kateb also notices similarities between action and project:

The project is a task without boundaries; one can never say that it is done, yet the whole meaning of it is found in every action done for its sake . . . It is never realized. The fact that I adopt a principle prevents no one else from adopting it too; it is inexhaustible. To act from a principle is not only to be inspired by it but to manifest it. A political actor does not *pursue* honor, for example; he does all that he does honorably, or he does honorable deeds. (1977, 153)

I differ from Kateb in asserting that one particular principle—care for the world—is inherent in the political tradition as described (and exemplified) by Arendt.

Some substantive orientation and moral content for judgment seem to be provided by the more or less formal conditions of action. The world provides action with context, meaning, a space to appear, and the possibility of remembrance, as well as a common point of reference and orientation. When we lose contact with the world, for any reason, we lose our sense of reality and our orientation in it. The various forms of world-alienation which have arisen in the West since the fall of the *polis* are the topics of most of Arendt's writing.

This concern is certainly at the center of Arendt's critique of much of the Western philosophical tradition. For Arendt, post-Socratic philosophy is itself a form of world-alienation, a turning away from appearance, perspective, and opinion toward contemplation, *theoria*, and a much more secure (enduring and wholly unperspectival) Truth.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Western science also seeks to penetrate behind opinion and the mere appearance of phenomena to the reality of the causal mechanisms that produce those phenomena. The test of truth becomes precisely its lack of contextuality and dependence on perspectival appearance. We search, instead, for ever more general causal principles expressed in a form which will enable us to predict and control, at least hypothetically, our environment. In Arendt's terms, we seek an Archimedean point, a perspective on the world that is no longer in it, nor in history or a particular context, nor embodied in a particular person in a particular place and time (Arendt 1958, 257ff). We attempt through science and *theoria* to transcend entirely the world and its relativism.<sup>19</sup>

Christianity epitomizes yet another form of world-alienation for Arendt, at least insofar as it turns elsewhere for its orientation. The world was an unhappy and temporary place for (at least some of) the early Christians, who would find the meaning of their existence only in leaving or transcending it. Reversing the previous Greek conception, the Christians held that it was the world which would pass away while human beings, or their souls, would live forever (Arendt 1977a, 52ff). Both the goodness that Christianity espouses and the revelatory truth it promulgates disdain the world and the opinions or viewpoints of human beings. For Arendt, any attempt to import practical or political truth from outside the realm of politics and opinion, whether from religion or philosophy or science, constitutes an effort to circumvent the ontological condition of human beings and the epistemological limitations inherent in this condition. By making this attempt, Christianity (and all otherworldly religions) attempts to privilege certain claims about the world and the people who live in and with it, forswears or radically curtails discussion of these issues, and is thus antipolitical. To the extent that a religion succeeds in doing this, it limits or actually destroys politics (which consists for the most part of people exchanging judgments and opinions) and thereby also

<sup>18</sup>This is a constant theme in many of Arendt's writings, but the most detailed statement of Arendt's position is found in *Thinking* (1978a).

<sup>19</sup>Perversely, it is the philosopher's insistence on leaving the world of appearances ("the beastliness of the multitude") that makes him begin to doubt its reality and eventually gives rise to Cartesian skepticism and solipsism (1978a, 47–53). This is also the root of the false choice between transcendent foundations and solipsism.

the opportunity for the sort of political freedom Arendt believes is possible and desirable.

In a similar manner, totalitarian ideology seeks to impose on people a particular "truth" or a particular perspective without the reality test of discussion and exchange of viewpoints. The world itself is betrayed or destroyed, and human existence takes on an unreal quality, almost as if it were lived "on another planet" (Arendt 1950, 63). With the "in-between" that separates, connects, and relates human beings gone, they are left in a sort of "organized loneliness" in which all that is left to orient thought and action are the premises of the ideology (Arendt 1973, 478). In totalitarianism, the principle of plurality is abolished in the sense that individual perspectives on the world no longer matter and are replaced by the mechanical logic of one idea or ideal. The perspective of the leader (or of the ideology) is substituted for the perspectives of everyone. Thus, while the world ought to serve to secure the unique perspective of individual subjects and yet relate them one to another externally, totalitarianism, by abolishing the world or unweaving the previously existing web of relationships, seeks to press them together into a single unified perspective.

As the world "disappears" before the very eyes of these subjects, their sense of reality, the community's common sense, and everyone's capacity for good judgment also disappear. Their former means of orienting themselves is replaced by the inherent distortions of a single perspective without the reality check provided by the dialogical presence of other perspectives. Under totalitarianism, and as exemplified by Adolf Eichmann,

[a]ll the moral norms of behavior in the Western tradition collapsed overnight and it seemed as if the original nature of morals (*mores*—custom, manners) and ethics (*ethos*—custom, habit) had suddenly revealed themselves for what they were—that is, customs or behavior patterns which could be changed as easily as table manners. This arouses our suspicion that morality was never more than that—as if morality was a dream from which we had suddenly awakened.<sup>20</sup>

Without the enduring point of reference the world gives us, one belief system indeed becomes just as good as any other. We become ensnared in utter relativism and can find escape only through single-minded faith in suprahuman principles and processes that serve as the initial premises of totalitarian ideologies. When these initial premises are accepted, what matters thereafter is only consistency, and sometimes not even that.

These attitudes help to explain one aspect of Arendt's complex intellectual relationship with Kant. The Categorical Imperative is precisely the sort of transcendent principle that threatens what is distinctively human in human affairs. With the Categorical Imperative, Kant attempts to introduce into human affairs

something that runs counter to its fundamental relativity. The inhumanity which is bound up with the concept of one single truth emerges with particular clarity in Kant's work precisely

<sup>20</sup>These remarks are quoted by Denny (1979, 254) and derive originally from Arendt's lecture course "Reconsiderations of Basic Moral Propositions" held at the University of Chicago in 1966.

because he attempted to found truth on practical reason; it is as though he who had so inexorably pointed out man's cognitive limits could not bear to think that in action, too, man cannot behave like a god. (1968a, 27)

Because Kant proclaims a transcendent principle, a monological moral Truth which overwhelms human plurality and transcends perspectival consciousness, Arendt must reject his practical philosophy. Only when Kant abandons his quest for Truth to consider matters of taste does Arendt find him useful in formulating a theory of judgment.

Concern for the world also animates Arendt's notorious but usually misunderstood separation of social and economic questions from politics and her refusal to accept pity as a legitimate basis for political action. The French Revolution, in Arendt's view, illustrates the dangers both of allowing economic or social questions to intrude on or overwhelm politics, and of allowing sentiment or emotion rather than principle to guide political action. Thus, Robespierre and his associates began to glorify suffering, "hailing the exposed misery as the best and even only guarantee of virtue . . . [and] set out to emancipate the people not *qua* prospective citizens but *qua malheureux*" (Arendt 1963, 111). When it was brought out in public, the depth of Robespierre's pity for the poor

turned into the boundlessness of an emotion that seemed to respond only too well to the boundless suffering of the multitude in their sheer overwhelming numbers. By the same token, he lost the capacity to establish and hold fast to rapports with persons in their singularity; the ocean of suffering around him and the turbulent sea of emotion within him . . . drowned all specific considerations, the considerations of friendship no less than the considerations of statecraft and principle. (1963, 90)

The plurality of particular persons became the singular abstract mass, *le peuple*. Pity turned into delirious rage, and thence into the Terror.

Arendt insists that concern with social questions should be inspired by principle rather than sentiment. It is justice and not pity that makes the welfare of the poor a political question. When our actions are inspired by pity or some other emotion, we begin to lose our bearings, precisely because such emotions take no account of, and are harmful to, the "in-between" that separates and relates human beings. Political action and the world that shelters and facilitates it lose their unique character and existential possibilities. Eventually, "the social" entirely replaces "the political," and the public realm becomes preoccupied with the maintenance and smooth operation of the life-process itself. The web of relationships that constitute the world is increasingly dominated by the demands of the life process, and human beings become more and more closely identified with their economic roles.

The common theme running through all of these arguments is the unique nature and fragility of action, freedom, and especially the world of human affairs. The public realm is

an area in which there are many voices and where the announcement of what each "deems truth" both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together

comprise the world. Every truth outside this area, no matter whether it brings men good or ill, is inhuman in the literal sense of the word . . . because it might have the result that all men might suddenly unite in a single opinion, so that out of many opinions one would emerge, as though not men in their infinite plurality but man in the singular, one species and its exemplars, were to inhabit the earth. Should that happen, the world, which can form only in the interspaces between men in all their variety, would vanish altogether. (1968a, 30–31)

An absolute or transcendental Truth, even if it were possible, would mean a fundamental change in the human condition, an end to politics and discourse, and thus also to humanness and the possibility of freedom. That is why Arendt (1977d, 224–25) lauds Cicero's *humanitas* for his refusing to take either scientific or philosophical truths, or beauty, as absolutes. For Arendt, as for the Romans, *humanitas* "meant something that was the very height of humanness because it was valid without being objective" (Arendt 1968b, 73).

The world, it turns out, is itself perishable. It can be undermined or dissolved or obscured in any number of ways. Like Aristotle's *ethos* and Kant's *sensus communis*, the world provides intersubjective criteria for evaluating actions and potential actions. Such criteria are by no means absolute, but they do save us from pure subjectivism and they do provide supplementary moral content to the rather dubious quest for self-disclosure that sometimes seems to ground Arendt's theory of action. In view of our growing post-Nietzschean awareness of the contingency of even our most deeply held values and assumptions, they provide us, moreover, with the only orientation we have.

The tragedy and futility associated with the contingency and unpredictable consequences of action are relieved only by the recognition that these conditions are also the conditions of our freedom, and by our identification with the world we live in, hold in common, and leave behind. That is why Arendt (1982, 50) insists that care for the world is superior to care for the self and why it is important to recognize, as she claims Bertolt Brecht did, that "on the day you must leave the world it will be of greater consequence to leave behind you a better world than to have been good" (Arendt 1968c, 236).<sup>21</sup> Our lives in the world are transient and even ephemeral, but the world itself holds out at least the possibility of greater durability

<sup>21</sup>Several of Arendt's discussions of Machiavelli (e.g., 1958, 77–78; 1977b, 136–41; 1982, 50ff) illustrate this point. Arendt considers "goodness" to be an essentially unworldly quality; many of those who want to be good ultimately care little for the world. Thus Machiavelli's insistence that princes and citizens must learn how not to be good is an enjoinder to care for and about the world. Arendt writes:

If you do not resist evil, the evildoers will do as they please. Though it is true that, by resisting evil, you are likely to be involved in evil, your care for the world takes precedence in politics over your care for your self—whether this self is your body or your soul. (Machiavelli's "I love my native city more than my soul" is only a variation of: I love the world and its future more than my life or my self). (1982, 50)

In this way, care for the world is superior to Christian goodness as a political principle. Arendt, moreover, sees no contradiction between love of God and care for the world: "Most of Machiavelli's arguments against religion are directed against those who love themselves, namely their own salvation, more than the world; they are not directed against those who really love God more than they love either the world or themselves" (1963, 290).

and permanence. It provides us with identity and continuity, and gives us guideposts by which we can take our bearings and orient ourselves and our actions.

Clearly, however, care for the world is not only expressed through political activity. History, story-telling, art, and poetry are all ways of tending to and augmenting the world on which Arendt placed considerable value. The world, in fact, is constituted through *poiesis* to a perhaps greater extent than by *praxis*. By reifying history and the stories generated by action, historians, story-tellers, artists, and poets give the world its permanence and facilitate our common experience of its features.

Culture and politics, then, belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it. (1977d, 223)

Even Arendt's version of the *vita contemplativa*, often seen as a turning away from politics and worldly concerns, strives to make us "at home in the world" (1953, 377). Thinking itself, which in Arendt's scheme explicitly requires withdrawal from the world, is nevertheless a form of critical love for the world, "always taking sides for the world's sake, understanding and judging everything in terms of its position in the world at any given time" (1968a, 7–8).

But our concern here is with politics and political judgment. *Love of freedom* (entailed in Arendt's theory of action) and *care for the world* (which provides a space and a record and a context and an orientation for action) provide quasi-transcendental foundations for political judgment. They are the more or less formal conditions that must obtain if politics and political action in Arendt's sense are to be viable possibilities. But they also provide substantive moral and practical content to the theory of judgment and thus perhaps also a bridge over the abyss of relativism.

Of course, even love of freedom and care for the world are themselves contingent values, but they are the practical foundation of political activity. If one engages in politics, or practices political theory, one is almost automatically implicated in one or the other value, or both. To be political, at least in Arendt's sense, is to love freedom and to care for the world.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the search for foundations and motivations are only, as Wittgenstein would say, irreducible forms and patterns and conditions of human life. We live with each other in history and the world, we often find ourselves having to make choices and act, and what we do and what we leave behind are in large measure up to us.

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<sup>22</sup>Ultimately, we have to choose where our commitments are. Speaking of education, Arendt tells us there is a "point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable" (1977e, 196).



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