

THE ROLE OF AESTHETICS IN THE POLITICS OF HANNAH ARENDT

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Hannah Arendt's work is often interpreted as promoting an aesthetic form of politics. For Arendt, political action discloses who someone is in words and deeds, and reveals her unique character. Because political actions disclose the uniqueness of the individual actor, Arendt's politics seems to advocate the artistic expression of the political actors as the primary purpose for politics. Politics would be like a work of art, in which a few political actors express themselves to an audience of spectators who view their artistic work. Politics becomes an expressive art for the benefit, distinction, and fame of certain individuals, rather than focusing on the needs of the community as a whole. Arendt's discussion of political judgment provides further evidence for an aesthetic interpretation of her work. For Arendt, political actions are judged by a community through the use of reflective judgments of taste that are similar to Kantian aesthetic judgments. The term "taste" is most often used in relation to art objects, so politics is assumed to be aesthetic for Arendt, given her model of judgment based upon Kant's theory of taste. Overall, Arendt has received both criticism and praise for the perception of her politics as a type of artistic display. However, the relation between aesthetics and politics in Hannah Arendt's thought is complicated, and she was very careful not to conflate the two.¹ In this essay, I argue that Arendt does not aestheticize politics or believe that political actions should be interpreted through aesthetic categories. First, this view would violate her distinction between the activities of action and work, and second, this interpretation would ignore her assertion that the spectators who judge are more important than the political actors. Al-

though there are some points of commonality between politics and aesthetics in Arendt's project, she remained suspicious of attempts to aestheticize or romanticize politics, even at the level of judgment.

Arendt's account of action in *The Human Condition* is the initial source of the difficulty in interpreting the relation between aesthetics and politics in her thought. In this work, she distinctly divides the activities of labor, work, and action. Labor is a human activity concerned with the cyclical and repetitive biological needs of human life that must be renewed continuously. Work, in contrast to labor, builds more permanent fabricated structures that begin to separate persons from nature. Through work and fabrication, humans build a world with a higher degree of permanence and durability to stand against nature and to separate themselves from the cyclical demands of nature. Finally, action is participation in the political life that discloses persons in their singularity, and gives them the opportunity to be remembered. Action is important for Arendt because through words and deeds persons can accomplish acts that are unique to them. She writes in *The Human Condition*, "in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world."² In other words, political action discloses "who" someone is.³ Also, through political action, one can attain a degree of immortality because through oral and written record and tradition, an individual's action can be remembered beyond one's lifespan. Many have interpreted Arendt's discussion of action from *The Human Condition* as an aesthetic activity because action discloses persons in their individuality through

performance. Politically, Arendt seems to be endorsing an aesthetic model of politics which promotes the creativity and individuality of the actor above all else.

Once action is interpreted as aesthetic, Arendt is generally either criticized or applauded. The critics of Arendt's "aestheticization" of politics believe that she promotes the creativity and virtuosity of the political actor, at the expense of others within the community. George Kateb, for example, believes that Arendt has a tendency to celebrate the play of the actor, without considering the moral consequences of such action.⁴ Kateb asserts that since action is not tied to universal moral judgments, the actor has free reign when it comes to how he or she chooses to act. All kinds of action, no matter how immoral, seem allowable and permissible for the sake of the actor's performance. Consequently, the creative development of the actor could easily lead to detrimental consequences for the community, because the actor's creativity is prioritized. For Kateb, the demands of disclosing the individual actor override the political needs of the community as a whole in Arendt's work.

The best of those who defend Arendt's "aestheticization" of politics, such as Dana Villa, are careful to note that the political "art" of action is not a type of political fabrication or romanticism, which is often criticized by Arendt. Nonetheless, in *Arendt and Heidegger: the Fate of the Political*, Villa asserts that the aesthetic interpretation of action is a positive component to Arendt's thought. Since action primarily concerns freedom and performance, Villa thinks that it can be characterized as "artistic" and she claims that Arendt is inspired by Nietzsche in her artistic portrayal of action. Arendt's strength over Nietzsche, however, is that she adopts Nietzsche's critique of Western Metaphysics and Platonism, but improves upon it by overcoming its political and ethical weaknesses, such as its tendency towards nihilism, subjectivism, and relativism. Villa thinks that Arendt surpasses Nietzsche's

work because she supplements her view with a Kantian theory of judgment. By using Kant's aesthetic ideas such as disinterestedness and common sense, Villa asserts that Arendt maintains a boundary that keeps the "play playful," and places limits on the undesirable forms of action for the community.⁵ Another important difference between Nietzsche and Arendt's projects for Villa, is that although the political actors are disclosed through action, they do not express themselves, because the meaning of the action is determined by the audience.⁶ Thus, Villa stresses Arendt's aesthetic model of politics as performative, rather than expressive. Although Villa's interpretation of Arendt's politics is sophisticated because it eliminates expressive romanticism, he still maintains that Arendt's politics is primarily artistic, and action, understood as "artistic," is a good model for politics. However, throughout her work, Arendt recognizes the danger of an artistic model of politics and has been highly critical of such models.

Even in *The Human Condition*, the source of her so-called aestheticization of politics, Arendt clearly separates aesthetics from political action. Art works are fabrications created by human work, rather than action. The main purpose of art objects is that they help to create an objective and durable world for a community. In distinction from the endless, cyclical, necessities attended to by human labor, the world created by fabrication is somewhat independent from nature and provides a space of durability and relative permanence in which politics can take place. The world built by human fabrication stabilizes human life, provides shelter from the natural world, and for Arendt, is the necessary precondition for the public space of action.⁷ Fabrications, including art works, allow for the creation of a public space that relates and separates individuals, and makes action possible.

Like all other fabricated things, art works begin with the idea of the artist. Each art work is constructed according to the idea or

blueprint of the artist and is built by human hands. The idea of the work is used as a pattern to guide the actualization of the end product.⁸ The excellence of the object is determined by how well the product mimics its conceptualization.⁹ The fabricator has control over the process of creation and there is a degree of reversibility with fabrications because the worker can destroy the product and begin again if the product is not satisfactory. For Arendt, all fabrications, including art works, are guided by a means-end rationale. The idea or pattern serves as a means to guide the fabricator in creating the actual object.

However, art has a special place amongst fabricated things for Arendt. Art works are the most durable of fabricated things because they are not used like other use objects, such as chairs, tables, and instruments. Art has a durability of a higher order than other use objects and therefore has the potential to survive longer.¹⁰ Thus art objects have a similarity to political action because they can touch upon immortality, but they remain different because art is ultimately always an object of fabrication that helps provide a stable and objective world. Art can assist action, because poets and artists can help to preserve the stories of the actions in order to immortalize the acts, but the artistic process itself is not action for Arendt. The main purpose of the work of art is to contribute to the permanence and durability of a fabricated human world that will last throughout the ages and provide a home for human beings.

The art work must be placed in the realm of fabrication in Arendt's project, but even in the case of art itself, the importance of art is not the creative expression of the artist. In *Between Past and Future*, she states that art work helps to provide a stable world for human beings and this function is more important and compelling than the expression of creativity by the artist. She asserts that art provides a record of cultural history that far surpasses the psychological state of artists,

and thus art can only be judged by its lastingness and durability as an object.¹¹ The focus of art for Arendt, therefore, is not on the creativity of the artist, but concerns the objectivity of the created thing. If art, like a painting, is used for other purposes, such as the disclosure of the artist, the refinement of the social taste of the viewer, or even to cover a hole in the wall, it runs the risk of no longer being able to fulfill its function, which is to provide a stability and continuity throughout the ages for human beings.¹² One of Arendt's critiques of mass society is that it tends to consume art works for entertainment purposes, which threatens the durability and lastingness of art and the fabricated world. She claims that this will hinder the possibility of human action because without lasting structures, there will not be a permanent space for political activity. For her, the most important purposes of art are its durability and objectivity. Even for the artist, the expressive quality of art is not of great importance, which makes political action thought of as artistic expression, highly unlikely.¹³

Although art has a positive function for Arendt by helping to build a more permanent world, she is highly critical when the model of fabrication that is used to create art works and other permanent structures, is applied politically. Following Heidegger, she sustains the importance of the Greek distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*. She is against the fabrication model of politics based upon *poiesis*. If action is aesthetic, then politics is interpreted as a process that can be fabricated, created, and controlled according to the idea or "pattern" of one actor who expresses himself in the creation of the political act. For Arendt, this is impossible because political action cannot be predicted and controlled in this manner. Action falls into a web of human relationships and how an action will be received cannot be controlled in advance. Action is unpredictable because it relies upon other people. The spectators, who view the action, decide its

ultimate meaning through a reflective judgment. The actors cannot completely control or fashion the outcome of their action, and they also cannot control how they are disclosed to a community. These decisions do not belong to one individual, but are intersubjective in Arendt's view and are decided upon by the community as a whole. If one seeks to control all aspects of politics like one would control the process of fabrication, the result is tyrannical. Politics would be based upon one vision of the good, rather than taking into account the differing views of members of a community. The belief in a fabrication model of politics is one of the major political problems of contemporary times for Arendt. If action were to be understood as a type of creative art, then action would function like a fabrication where the actor uses a pattern in order to create a particular end. Fabricated politics is the antithesis of Arendt's conception of politics, which stresses the tyrannical danger of a politics dominated by one viewpoint whose ends are fabricated like one would fabricate an art work. Arendt describes the problem of the fabrication model of politics as the "substitution of making for acting," because action is replaced by the fabrication. If political action were aesthetic, then politics would suffer from precisely the problem that she criticizes.

Arendt traces the problem of the substitution of making for acting back to Plato's philosophy. Fearing the unpredictability and irreversibility of action, Plato sought a more predictable standard for politics, guided by "ideas" or forms which derive from a model of fabrication. These "ideas" provide a universal pattern or plan for ruling the state. Since there is only one ideal model, utopian politics becomes possible because there is one universal plan that assures consensus amongst all the members of the community.¹⁴ However, Arendt claims that a universal politics founded on the model of fabrication, crushes human plurality and leads to domination because there is only one ideal plan of

action that merely needs to be instituted. In the fabrication model of politics, politics is controlled by a master in the technique of human affairs who constructs the state according to a blueprint.¹⁵ She thinks that a "form" that guides the production of the state is precisely "at the root of all theories of domination which are not mere justifications of an irreducible and irresponsible will to power."¹⁶

In her essay from 1961, "Freedom and Politics," Arendt plainly states that regardless of the perceived similarities between art and action, the political relation is not modeled upon the creative arts.¹⁷ She states:

Because all action demands virtuosity, and because virtuosity is a characteristic peculiar to the applied arts, the opinion has been widely held that politics constitutes an art. If, as is frequently the case the word art is understood to mean creative art, and the State is regarded as a work of art, as, indeed, the greatest work of art created by the hand of man, then such an idea is completely false. In terms of the creative arts, which produce something concrete that survives the labor that produced it and is completely disassociated from it, politics are the very reverse of an art. . . . The State is not a work of art, because, if for no other reason, its existence never becomes independent of the actions of the men who created it.¹⁸

Clearly, it is Arendt's position that action is not a creative art. The purpose of fabrication is to create a durable object, while action cannot be interpreted in the same way, because it does not create an object that can be divided from the actor. Action discloses who a person is and does not create a fabrication from a pattern that can be separated from the actor. Art, in contrast, is produced through the means of a preconceived plan in order to achieve the production of the object that survives as part of the durable world. The tale or

story of the achievement may be preserved through artist's rendering, but action itself cannot be separated from the actors who create it in freedom. As Jacques Taminiaux points out, "what action introduces into the world is the *uniqueness* of someone: not the initiative he or she has of making something, but the initiative open to the individual for being somebody."¹⁹

Since Hannah Arendt does not believe that politics and art are the same, why does she look to an aesthetic text at all in order to construct a theory of political judgment? The pivotal similarity between Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment and politics is that both art and politics require a community of human beings in order to occur at all. She states in "Freedom and Politics":

Exactly as music, the ballet and the theater have need of an audience before which to unfold their virtuosity, action, too, requires the presence of others in a politically organized sphere . . . where men live together in some sort of community.²⁰

So it is not the creativity or expression of the actor that causes action to be like an art, but only that politics, like art, requires an audience of other people, in order to take place at all. Politics requires other people, and cannot occur in isolation. If politics does occur in isolation by one ruler, the result is tyranny, and possibly totalitarianism, because no other views are consulted. Art works also require a public of spectators and this is one reason why she looks at Kant's aesthetic writings in order to discuss political judgment.

Through exploring Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, a provisional theory of political judgment can be constructed.²¹ In this work, Arendt discusses the relation between the actor and spectator in Kant's philosophy. Arendt looks to Kant for a theory of judgment because Kant's focus is on the audience's reception of the art work,

rather than the creative process of the artist. This follows Kant's privilege of taste over genius in the third *Critique*. Kant thought that taste, which is used to judge an art object, is more important than the genius and originality needed to create the art work.²² For Kant, the function of art was not to fulfill the personality of the creator, but for it to be judged by the audience. Following Kant's aesthetic writings, Arendt believes the spectator of a political event is more important than the actor, because without the spectator, action could have no meaning.²³ It is the spectators who decide the meaning of the political action for a community and they determine how the political agent is disclosed. The spectators are vital because they come to an impartial decision concerning the meaning of the action based upon the community sense. The actors are partial when it comes to the meaning of their own action, and they are incapable of adequately judging the meaning of their action for a community. The actors also cannot completely control the meaning of their action or how they will be disclosed to a community because it depends upon the discussion and decision of the spectators. The focus of Arendt's politics, then, is not upon the aesthetic potential of political actors, but it is upon the common interest of a community composed of a plurality of citizens.

Action and artistic fabrication are distinct in Arendt's thought and should not be confused. Action is political, while art is fabricated or produced through human work. The similarity that lies between both action and artistic fabrication is that both require an audience of spectators, albeit in different ways and for different reasons. Art requires an audience to recognize the durability of the object in order to build a world separate from nature. Action requires spectators who will judge the action and decide what is best for a community.²⁴ Therefore, action does not have any meaning without the audience of spectators. Although judgments of beauty

and political judgments are similar in some ways, it cannot be concluded that politics is aestheticized by Arendt because it clearly goes against her classifications of action and work, her focus on the objectivity of the art object rather than the expression of the artist, and her distrust of a model of politics based upon *poiesis* and fabrication. Arendt's theory of political judgment is intended to allow for persons of differing views to participate in the process of deciding the meaning of political action. In this way, the community can judge based upon the best interests of the whole rather than privileging the actor's expression. Despite the apparent similarities between politics and art, it should not be concluded that politics is aestheticized by Arendt.

This being the case, Arendt escapes the criticisms of those who criticize her for con-

flating aesthetics and politics, but this does not rid her political theory of all its problems.²⁵ Although Arendt does not turn politics into art, there is a problem concerning the disclosure of the actor in political action. Although we are all spectators, not everyone will be an actor. In fact, Arendt rightly believes that not everyone will want to be a political actor in the public realm. Therefore, Arendt needs to admit some other forms of activity that allow individuals to disclose themselves as "who" they are. Otherwise, the actors will be the only persons afforded this opportunity and Arendt's politics will still be liable to the criticism that she unfairly prioritizes the political actors, even though it is argued that the spectators are more important politically.

ENDNOTES

1. Leah Bradshaw and Lisa Jane Dische agree that action is not aesthetic for Arendt; see *Action and Thinking: the Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 25, and *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 84.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 179.
3. *Ibid.*
4. George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld Publishers, 1984), pp. 30–35.
5. Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: the Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 81.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
7. There is controversy concerning whether Arendt falls into a type of cultural elitism by maintaining that freedom from labor and work are needed for political action. Although Arendt maintains that all human beings are equal, she also maintains that a certain level of technology and wealth is required to have political systems at all. The important question to be settled is whether or not she believes that the members of "undeveloped" communities are politically equal to those in economically developed communities.
8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 140.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
11. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1954), p. 202.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
13. Beyond the function of building a world, Arendt does not have a full account of aesthetic theory, but as Kimberly Curtis notes, Arendt's aesthetic theory could not be founded on the belief that beauty is a universal concept. See *Our Sense of the Real* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 98. Art, for Arendt, is always bound to the particularity of cultures because its function is to build a fabricated world for different communities.
14. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 227.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 225.
17. In "Freedom and Politics," Arendt denies the similarity between politics and the creative arts, but she ac-

knowledges similarities between politics and certain applied arts broadly construed because of the virtuosity that is demanded in the performance of them, and the lack of an object created by them. She points to the Greek comparisons between politics and the applied arts like flute-playing, dancing, the practice of medicine, and the profession of sea-faring as instances which have similarities with political action because they stress the virtuosity of the performance, rather than the creation of a fabricated end product. However, this comparison should not be understood as an aesthetic characterization of action, because skillful performance is not inherently artistic, and can apply to any number of activities. Arendt characterizes art works as belonging to the creative arts, and stresses the fabrication process involved, which makes artistic creation an activity separate from political action for Arendt.

18. Hannah Arendt, "Freedom and Politics," in Albert Hunold, *Freedom and Serfdom: an Anthology of Western Thought* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1961), p. 197.
19. Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker*. Translated and Edited by Michael Gendre (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 86.
20. Arendt, "Freedom and Politics," p. 197.
21. Arendt's theory of political judgment is provisional because the section in *Life of the Mind* entitled "Judging" was not completed due to her death. In order to try to uncover what she would have written in this work, many have looked to her lecture courses focusing on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.
22. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 188–89, 319–20.
23. Arendt, Hannah. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Ed. Ronald Beiner. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 62–63, 65.
24. Arendt claims that even though the function of the actor and spectators are different, all actors are also spectators and become part of the audience in order to judge actions that do not directly involve them (*Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 63).
25. Arendt's interpretation of the purpose of art as merely contributing to the durability of the fabricated world is a reductive view of the potential of art, most likely arising from her fear of aesthetics infecting the political realm.

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