

## HERMENEUTIC RESPONSIBILITY IN POLITICAL JUDGEMENT. RETRIEVING FACTUAL TRUTH FROM DIRECT INTERACTION

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I am arguing for hermeneutic responsibility in political judgment, as it can be attributed to Arendt's work. Political judgment is reflective judgment relying on representation by imagination and therefore only has exemplary validity. Along the line of Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* I point out her argument for a different generality in politics than the generality of concepts. This generality of political judgment always refers back to the particular. Only by this reference to the particular, namely to facts and situations of direct interaction, can the spectator, who undertakes the political judgment, create the public realm where action takes place. However, this task attributed to the spectator also implies the task of reshaping the public realm. These acts of giving an account of and reconsidering all over again facts handed over by narration and testimony imply the hermeneutic responsibility to unceasingly retrieve factual truth which is rooted in direct interaction.

**Key words:** Hannah Arendt, factual truth, reproductive imagination, political judgment, hermeneutic responsibility.

Two main features can be singled out in Hannah Arendt's works, namely her concern for the common world and, her concern for the individual. Most of her philosophical works are dedicated to the role of thought in politics and her aim was a better world in which individuals are free and act responsibly. With regard to this aim, Arendt planned to dedicate a volume to judgment. Present in earlier writings, judgment was to be the topic of the third and last part of "The Life of the Mind".

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Completing only *Thinking and Willing* (Arendt 1978), she died before having revised these completed parts. Mary McCarty, her friend who later on edited the typescript, explains that the first page of *Judging*, showing the title and two epigraphs was found in the typewriter (McCarthy 1978: 218). Nevertheless, the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*<sup>2</sup> that she gave at the University of Chicago five years earlier, in 1970, and which have been posthumously edited, are considered to be an outline and a first step towards the planned last part of *The Life of the Mind*: an exposition and interpretation of Kant's aesthetics and political writings (Beiner 1982: vii)<sup>3</sup>.

The concept of judgment that Arendt develops in the *Lectures* relies on Kant's third *Critique*, namely the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (CPJ)<sup>4</sup>. According to Arendt, the two parts of the third *Critique* "are more closely connected with the political than with anything in the other *Critiques*" (Arendt 1982: 13). The third *Critique* focuses both on "men in plural", as "they really are in society", and on "the human species", but not on the human being as "intelligible or cognitive being", which has prevailed in the first two critiques (Arendt 1982: 13). Arendt's reading of the aesthetic subject in the third *Critique* as a political subject, does not intend any reading of Kant against Kant: rather it intends to highlight the political potentiality of Kant's analysis. The aim of such an approach is to develop a possible Kantian political philosophy which he never wrote, having conceived only isolated political writings. As Arendt points out, Kant's concern was mainly the "sociability of men" (Arendt 1982: 14). Yet, in his late years Kant became aware of the distinction between the political and the social (Arendt 1982: 9)<sup>5</sup>. However, according to Arendt, he did not see the consequences and the value of his concept of aesthetic judgment for politics.

For judgment of the particular – *This is beautiful, This is ugly; This is right, This is wrong* – has no place in Kant's moral philosophy. Judgment is not practical reason; practical reason "reasons" and tells me what to do and what not to do; it lays down the law and is identical with the will, and the will utters commands; it speaks of imperatives (Arendt 1982: 15).

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<sup>2</sup> Further on in this paper referred to as *Lectures*.

<sup>3</sup> For a reading of the faculty of judgment in the context of the other faculties, a "reconstructive reading" of Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, see Fine R. 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See also: Cioflec 2018. A small, now reworked part of this paper has been submitted for being presented at the XXIIIrd World Congress of Philosophy in 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The distinction of the social and the political is a key to Arendt's concept of politics. Although both the social and the political refer to the public realm, only the political is constituted of plurality (see Cioflec 2012: 655 f.). For a sharp critique of this distinction, considering it to be "untenable", see Benhabib 2003: p. 172 f.

Arendt maintains that practical reason which is pivotal in Kant's moral philosophy, cannot stand in for political judgment. That is, if the law of reason "utters commands" as the will, then, as in Kant's philosophy, 'the particular', which is crucial to political judgment, would be neglected (Arendt 1982: 15). For Arendt, 'the general' in political judgment is doxastic<sup>6</sup>, which means it always takes place from our specific, situated point of view<sup>7</sup>. It can only be reached by reflective judgment on 'the particular' which is mediated by imagination. Hence, she chooses the model of the aesthetic judgment.

Many philosophers and political theorists have been puzzled by Arendt's concept of political judgment, especially by her turn to Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* on this matter<sup>8</sup>. While there is no consensus among Arendt's interpreters, we still can identify two parties of commentators: On the one hand, there are those who claim that rational validity has to be part of the political judgment and hence, question or dismiss the value of aesthetic judgment for the political. On the other hand, there are many readers who reaffirm Arendt's emphasis of the particular, sustaining or even continuing her work on political judgment. In short, the main characteristics of these two parties are respectively: reproaching Arendt of neglecting to establish rational foundations for politics and public debate (Habermas 1994, Benhabib 2003 a.o.), which leads to an 'unwarranted aesthetisation of politics' (Beiner 1982: 138); and accusing in line with Arendt's argument the neglect of the particular in rationalized politics (L. Zerilli, D. Villa, Young-Bruehl a.o.). Therefore, the divide between interpretations is mainly induced by the suspension of rational foundations for political judgment: There are no transcendental categories providing the general to which the particular is brought to, as there are for knowledge.

For Arendt, as we shall see, political judgment relies on reproductive imagination and is conceived as an outcome of referencing others as well as meanings handed down from the past. These unreliable foundations trigger questioning the validity of judgment to the extent that her concept of judgment is dismissed. Certainly, as Zerilli points out, since renouncing validity would leave the very concept of judgment empty, if the discussion on judgment is to have any continuation, the

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of *doxa* in Arendt's terms see Lederman 730 f.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt uses the "general" (germ. das Allgemeine) and not universal, in order to point out different types of generality. The concept as the generality provided for reason does not apply for the generality reached by judgment, which is always anchored in "the particular", meaning the "conditions of the standpoint one has" (Arendt 1982, 43–44). Further on in this paper I will use the terms "general" and "particular" without quotation marks.

<sup>8</sup> There is a continuous debate on this matter several contributors will be mentioned in the following. However, the challenge of the topic has been pointed out by the editor R. Beiner in the Introduction to the *Lectures* (Beiner 1982).

problematic of validity of the political judgment cannot be suspended (2005: 160): Yet, Arendt's emphasis on the particular as "the most fundamental theme in Arendt's political thinking" (Bernstein 1997: 159), keeps her thoughts in actuality, since plurality, which is vital to free politics (Canovan 1983, Loidolt 2018), requests a conception that does justice to the particular. This is the aspect which mostly awakens the interest in Arendt's work on judgment. Hence, we wonder if a reconciliation between the particular as Arendt emphasizes it, and the political judgment is only possible at the very high cost of the loss of validity.

However, suspending the foundation of political judgment in reason, Arendt could have turned to Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom, *phronesis* (Wellmer 2001: 166)<sup>9</sup>. And she did so, at least for her theory of action in *The Human Condition* (Melaney 2006)<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, she did not choose *phronesis* as a guide for political judgment and instead she chose Kant's reflective aesthetic judgment as a model and this is precisely what puzzles the interpreters. If concern is about the particular, then why she didn't use only *phronesis* that is the practical wisdom, based on which we know how to deal with particular situations?<sup>11</sup> Why did she turn to Kant's third *Critique* for political judgment? Elisabeth Young-Bruehl concisely points out: "Arendt thought that Aristotle's exploration of judging was limited by his assumption that *phronesis* deals with goals of action imagined as given and knowable (that is his lack of appreciation for reflective judgment), but she did credit him with being the lone precursor of Kant's enlarged mentality, which Kant himself did not recognize as political ability" (Young-Bruehl 2006: 182). For Arendt, there is no imaginable or knowable goal to be reached in politics; rather politics aims at freedom.<sup>12</sup> In political judgment the state of affairs does always include the possibility of a new beginning, of being reshaped (Zerilli 2005: 160).

On what follows, I will argue that Arendt's emphasis on the factual truth as central to political judgment entails *hermeneutic responsibility*. First, by pointing out the central role of imagination with regard to the exemplary, I show how political judgment is the link between the particular and generality. Then, I argue

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<sup>9</sup> In this paper I am only concerned with political judgment. Kristeva contends Arendt's "refusal of any sort of transcendentalism" (Kristeva 2008: 361).

<sup>10</sup> For Arendt's interpretation and revision of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, see Melaney 2006.

<sup>11</sup> I use the term "situation" as distinct from "event". "Situation" does not refer to circumstances or occurrences, rather it implies an action related to it, such that it draws its meaning from the action to follow. An "event" turns into a situation once it calls for action. For a thorough analysis of the relation between action and situation see Çapek 2010.

<sup>12</sup> As Villa puts it: "What Kant offers (and Aristotle doesn't) is a way of conceiving judgment that does not subsume the individual under a community" (1997: 197). For a more detailed discussion of the shift from *phronesis* to judgment in Arendt's thought see Lederman 2016: 734 f.

for the hermeneutical characteristic of the 'object' of judgment, namely facts as considered by judgment, by highlighting the central role of the spectator. I conclude that hermeneutical responsibility leads to constant reconsideration of factual truth and putting political judgment to the test.

### **Reflective Judgment, Exemplary Validity and Direct Interaction**

If judgment means to "subsume the particular under the general" (CPJ: 9), then the issue is the manner in which 'the general' for political judgment of particular situations is constituted. Whereas for Kant a priori concepts constitute 'the general' for epistemic judgment and for knowledge, moral judgments though as Arendt certainly was aware of, can only be deduced from maxims (see Benhabib 1992: 36 f.; Bernstein 1986: 232-233). However, none of these apply to "those concepts which must first of all be found for given empirical intuitions" (CPJ, 16). While Kant limits this problematic to aesthetics, Arendt contends that it applies to the political too.

The different types of judgment, "subsuming a particular under a general" (CPJ, 9), such as inductive and deductive, or determinant (Arendt 1982: 84), as well as reflective, vary by the way in which the particular is brought to or subsumed under a general. From the beginning of her *Lectures*, Arendt clearly delimits her understanding of judgments "as a distinct capacity of our minds", which "are not arrived at by either deduction or induction; in short, they have nothing in common with logical operations" (Arendt 1982: 4). The distinct capacity that she singles out is the reflective judgment which is applicable to political judgment.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant introduced reflective judgment as opposed to deductive judgment which is the determining power of judgment.

The power of judgment can be regarded either as a mere faculty for *reflecting* on a given representation, in accordance with a certain principle, for the sake of a concept that is thereby made possible, or as a faculty for *determining* an underlying concept through a given *empirical* representation. In the first case it is the *reflecting*, in the second case the *determining power of judgment*. *To reflect* (to consider), however, is to compare and to hold together given representations either with other or with one's faculty of cognition, in relation to a concept thereby made possible. The reflecting power of judgment is that which is also called the faculty of judging (*facultas diiudicandi*) (CPJ: 15).

Reflective judgment starts from particulars as they appear in the world and then it moves toward general statements. In Kant's terms it develops 'reflectively', and not 'deductively' (see also Young Bruehl 2006: 49). Being reflective in political judgment

is to imply representation, which is possible by the faculty of imagination. While imagination can be productive or reproductive as representation, only the latter provides sources for judgment. For Kant, understanding without concepts, which is to reach objectivity, refers to the communicability of taste, which is an inner sense. Inner senses, i.e. smell and taste, “cannot be represented” and “there can be no dispute about matters of taste” (Arendt 1982: 66). However, this immediacy of perception will itself be approved or disapproved by reflection (Arendt 1982: 69). Whether something tastes well can be communicated; what we communicate about is our approval of the representation of the initial perception such that taste does not remain a mere subjective feeling. As Arendt noted “It is not important whether or not it pleases in perception; what pleases merely in perception is gratifying but not beautiful. It pleases in representation, for the imagination has now prepared it so that I can reflect on it” (Arendt 1982: 67). The singular needs to be brought to generality in order to be communicated, and therefore, we need to surpass the strictly subjective inner feeling. In matters of taste for example, this general is mediated by a “play of imagination”, which has rules, yet it is not conceptualized:

Only where the imagination in its freedom arouses the understanding, and the latter, without concepts, sets the imagination into a regular play is the representation communicated, not as a thought, but as the inner feeling of a purposive state of mind (CPJ: 175-6).

Hence imagination, as “the faculty of having present what is absent” (Arendt 1982: 66), the faculty which enables representation, constitutes the bridge to the general which can be communicated. But the main issue is that imagination provides the possibility of communicating something though “not as a thought”. This is similar to its status in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that imagination plays the role of a link.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the image, schema, provided by imagination of a general concept, allows perceiving a particular. For instance, a table can be perceived as a table, given that there is a general idea of the table.

For us the following is decisive: 1. In perception of this particular table there is contained: ‘table’ as such. Hence, no perception is possible without imagination (...) 2. The schema ‘table’ is valid for all particular tables. Without it, we would be surrounded by a manifold of objects to which we could only say: this and this. (...) 3. Hence: Without saying ‘table’ we could never communicate (comp. Arendt 1982: 81)<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt Papers, Digitized Collection, the Library of Congress, Washington, Hannah Arendt Papers, files 032504, 032505.

Therefore, the *schema* is central to knowledge and subsequently to communication. Arendt quotes Kant that “The two extremes, namely sensibility and understanding, must be brought into connection with each other by means... of imagination, because otherwise the former, though indeed yielding appearances, would supply no objects of empirical knowledge, hence no experience” (Arendt 1982: 81; comp. Kant 1998: 241; A 124).

The schema provides the common characteristic of particulars, and it is “in the back of the minds of many different people” (Arendt 1982: 83). For Kant, in the first *Critique*, the power of producing a schema bridges the intuition (sensibility) and concepts (understanding), relies on imagination and it is transcendental. Imagination provides the synthesis by “providing an image for a concept” (Arendt 1982: 81, comp. Kant 1998: 273; B 180). This role of imagination which provides schemata for cognition as the connection between intuition and concepts, makes possible the subsumption of empirical diversity under concepts. However, the mediation of the particular with the general changes in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and loses its transcendental character.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, we find an analogy to the ‘schema’: the example. Kant accords to examples the same role in judgment that the intuitions called schemata have for experience and cognition (Arendt: 1982: 84).

Here, reproductive imagination allows both representing situations and recollecting previous judgments. This double role of reproductive imagination makes the exemplary possible. An example functions by comparison:

Suppose I look at a specific slum dwelling and I perceive this particular building notion which it does not exhibit directly, the notion of poverty and misery. I arrive at this notion by representing to myself how I would feel if I had to live there, that is, I try to think in the place of the slum-dweller. The judgment I shall come up with will by no means necessarily be the same as that of the inhabitants whom time and hopelessness may have dulled to the outrage of their condition, but it will become an outstanding example for my further judging of these matters (Arendt 2003a: 140; comp. Beiner 1982: 107-8).

The meaning of the situation is not conceptualized and it remains exemplary. The analogy that follows by comparison, is provided by representative imagination – the novel situation I am about to judge is “like” the situation I recollect. “The example is the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule” (Arendt 1982: 84). The exemplary allows us to see a certain type of situations or a certain type of objects without an abstract notion: I recognize by

comparison in my imagination any other similar situations (see also Ferrara 2008: 48). Hence, judgment is validated by examples: “The examples lead and guide us, and the judgment thus acquires ‘exemplary validity’ ” (Arendt 1982: 84; CPJ: 123).

Facts inform judgment, and truth “is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us” (Arendt 2006: 259). But judgment is mediated by imagination, which “makes present...what is still absent” (Arendt 2003a: 157) and thereby forms opinions of the represented facts. Thus, the validity of judgment is provided intersubjectively, which means that it “depends on the presence of the others” (Arendt 2006: 217), by interacting with others. Well-grounded opinions about facts neither rely on unmediated factual truth, nor are founded in rationality. Alessandro Ferrara, by emphasizing ‘exemplary validity’, rightly points out the “*autonomy* of judgment”; judgment does not imply the rationality of a consensus apparent from a “third-person standpoint”: “when we are immersed in the deliberative context from the standpoint of the participant, we certainly cannot invoke as a justification for our choice, the rationality of a consensus is not yet formed” (Ferrara 2008: 45).

When judging, however, the subject is withdrawn from political events and direct interaction with others. As much as the others are present, the reflective character of judgment requires to be withdrawn from acting, from the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think” (Arendt 1978: 192). Consequentially, this leads to the emphasis on the role the spectator.

### **The Spectator and the object of judgment**

In her emphasis of generality and impartiality of judgment Arendt favours the spectator before the actor. “The actor is partial by definition” (Arendt 1983: 69), but the judgment of the spectator can reach impartiality by taking the perspective of everybody else in reflection<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, while I take into account others when judging, this does not mean that I conform in my judgment to their’s. I still speak with my own voice and I do not count noses in order to arrive at what I think is right. But my judgment is no longer subjective either, in the sense that I arrive at my conclusions by taking only myself into account (Arendt 2003a: 140; comp. Beiner 1982: 107-8).

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<sup>14</sup> The spectator as historian and storyteller enters the central stage of Arendt’s account on political judgment only in her late writings, beginning in 1970 (Beiner 1982). For a comparison to Arendt’s earlier writings, where the actor can be seen as making the political judgment see Yar 2000. For discarding the assumption of an actor’s theory of judgment and the scholarly debate concerning the actor’s judgment see Lederman 2016.



This dependency on others might wrongly lead to the idea that one could never judge on his own. Arendt actually means that one can take the position of the others. She refers this possibility for judgment back to the communities one lives in, which is a part of what determines the common sense (Arendt 1982: 72) which discloses the common world we “share with others” (2006: 218). However, these communities are not confined to small cultural or regional communities. In taking the other into account, the other does not refer to a particular other, or to a particular community, rather it hints, as seen above, to the ability of thinking impartially in the place of everybody else, which Kant calls “enlarged thought” (comp. CPJ: 174 f.). Enlarged thought makes the communicability of judgments possible; since one is able to communicate only if capable of thinking from the standpoint of the interlocutor (Arendt 2006: 74). Furthermore, it ensures validity in the public realm and liberates judgment itself from “subjective private conditions” (Arendt 2006: 217).

Political thought is representative. 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. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my final conclusions, my opinion (Arendt 2006: 237).

Being subjective, opinions are partial, but not self-evident. The “truly discursive” thinking in matters of opinions, determines these to run “as it were from place to place, from one part of the world to the other though all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from all these particularities to some impartial generality” (Arendt 2006: 238).

The spectator is able to relate to a specific situation, by representing and hence by taking distance. The immediate involvement of the actor prevents him per definition from taking distance, reflect and judge. Moreover, the judging spectator is also different from the detached thinker, since in judging she or he deals with things “close at hand”:

The faculty of judging particulars (as Kant discovered it), the ability to say, ‘this is wrong’, ‘this is beautiful’, etc. is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars or things close at hand (Arendt 1978: 192).

The possibility to take distance and yet to judge a certain political situation is given by imagination and not the thought.

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This ‘distancing’ of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding (Arendt 1982: 302).

Freedom in a political situation derives from this possibility to take distance from the specific situation and reflect, in order to judge it. However, even if distanced from immediate action, the spectator remains related to the situation of action. Although the general viewpoint in which we form judgments “does not tell one how to act” (Arendt 1982; 44), it still leads to taking part in political action. Arendt emphasizes that the strict separation of the spectator from the actor implied in the separation of philosophy and politics does not need to be upheld. „When the distinction between the two ways of life, the political (active) way and the philosophical (contemplative) way, is so construed as to render them mutually exclusive – as it is for instance in Plato’s political philosophy – one gets an absolute distinction between the one who *knows* what is best to do and the others who, following his guidance or his commands, will carry it through” (Arendt 1982: 59-60).

With Kant, Arendt advocates for the importance of the spectator by referring to the role played by the spectators in the French Revolution. The spectators turned the French Revolution into a historical event by following it and noting its meaning (Arendt 1982: 52). By doing so, they somehow become actors of the political by being spectators<sup>15</sup>. What sounds as a confusion of terms only highlights the impossibility of a strict delimitation between actors and spectators and becomes a criticism of artificial separation of the two. Moreover, the “critic and spectator sits in every actor” (Arendt 1982: 63), hence the separation in different roles of individuals in society is even more problematic. It is actually not the acting actors, but the spectators who by their judgments create the public realm, the

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<sup>15</sup> As Demeter points out, “the impartiality of political thinking, as it is political, cannot be achieved outside politics” (2006, 135). Yet, Lederman picks up the debate on who in Arendt’s works judges, namely the actor or the spectator (Lederman 2016, esp. 728–729). He indicates that even if the actor judges, he never does so meanwhile he or she acts (id. 731). However, the debate might be misleading if the distinction made between actor and spectator is too radical.

space of appearance (Cioflec 2012: 654 f.) in which actions appear and can be judged upon. Zerilli points out, that “Arendt attributes this turn to Kant, but it is Hannah Arendt herself who discovers, in her idiosyncratic reading of Kant, that it is the judging activity of the spectator, not the object they judge or its maker, that creates the public space” (Zerilli 2005: 179).

Although, as we have seen, the spectator himself can be considered to be indirectly acting by creating the public realm, the question remains, how political judgment actually guides the involved actor, lasts in political action. Guidance comes from the created public realm, since the actor is directly involved in it, meaning that she or he refers to the others, re-presents them. Judging involves thinking, and the thoughts reach the inter-subjective world through judgment: “judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances” (Arendt 1978: 192). Truth, both factual and rational, is beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent (Arendt 2006: 235). Nevertheless, judgment involves factual truth, refers back to the world: factual truth informs opinions which form the public realm, and this is how the judgment of the spectator reaches the actor.

Highlighting with Arendt the role of the spectator in political judgment, I read the *Lectures* as an attempt to also determine what the “object” which is what the judge reflects upon actually is, as Zerilli puts it, and how it is given or accessed. As an object, whatever the judge takes into account, it needs some sort of generality, otherwise it escapes consideration. Such, for instance an event, needs to be understood as something, where this something constitutes a generality to refer to. Since in Arendt’s conception generality in political judgments is not provided by reason nor by rules, the ‘object’ of political judgment will not be accessible. The faculty of judgment as she takes it over from Kant refers to a whole new dimension of our world than what can be known or what is moral, by referring to a different kind of objects it is concerned with. The object of judgment can only be shown as an object in the process of reflective judgment. Hence, facts are only considered by being turned into a situation of action by judgment, which is precisely how the public space is then constituted.

Sheila Benhabib calls this process “the exercise of moral judgment that is concerned with the epistemic identification of human situations and circumstances as morally relevant” (Benhabib 1992: 128). I believe “identification” would in this case presuppose a moral ‘givenness’ of the situations, a ‘pool’ of morally relevant situations, which judgment then analyses.

Indeed, as Benhabib rightly contends, judgment is defined by Arendt as being retrospective<sup>16</sup>. Yet, retrospection does not only refer to “culling meaning from the past” (Benhabib 1992: 122), but entails the disclosure of the object of judgment. The particulars as situations of action and circumstances are not epistemically identified, rather they are provided or given by judgment in reflection, which in turn is related to meaning from the past, and opinions formulated by others in their judgments. To put it differently: situations and circumstances *are* not morally relevant; One ascribes them moral relevance<sup>17</sup> in relation to meanings from the past. Thus, rather than identification, judgment is an investment of present relevance. This corresponds to the concept that the judging spectator creates and opens up the public realm for the future.

However, political responsibility, for Arendt, is not obviously moral, since Arendt questions moral philosophy (Arendt 2003a: 49 f.)<sup>18</sup>. She distinguishes “political (collective) responsibility” from “moral and/or legal (personal) guilt” (id.: 150-151, Alweiss 2003, Birmingham 2006: 144 n. 2). According to Herzog, Arendt defines responsibility in terms of political presence, not in legal or moral terms. She thereby refers to a presence in the public realm by acting, which presupposes re-presenting absent people in creating new presence (Herzog 2004, 51). This interpretation entails a responsibility to preserve the world as an in-between of human beings. Yet, all of these aspects call for a more detailed analysis, namely for the emphasis of the hermeneutic aspect of responsibility.

### **Factual truth and hermeneutic responsibility**

Truth is not at home in the political, or, at Arendt puts it, “truth and politics are rather on bad terms with each other” (Arendt 2006: 222). Arendt asserts that “since philosophical truth concerns man in his singularity, it is unpolitical by nature” (id.: 241). Although there are political facts, which could claim factual truth,

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<sup>16</sup> Benhabib indicates three claims on judgment Arendt makes: first, the moral judgment, the faculty which can “tell right from wrong” being a “guiding action”, second, “judgment as the retrospective faculty of culling meaning from the past”, and third, “the attempt to bring together the Aristotelian conception of judgment as an aspect of phronesis with the Kantian understanding of judgment as the faculty of ‘enlarged thought’ or ‘representative thinking’ ” (Benhabib 1992: 122).

<sup>17</sup> Dana Villa traces this thought back to Nietzsche, stating that Arendt: “agrees with Nietzsche that, in the public realm at least, there are no moral facts.” (Villa 1996: 96)

<sup>18</sup> Seyla Benhabib indicates the moral dimension of Arendt’s concept of judgment distinguishing between right and wrong. (Benhabib 1992: 122) As a moral dimension it entails moral responsibility, an aspect which Benhabib does not pursue further.

we are only aware of them, only know of them by forming an opinion. Regarding factual truths Arendt claims that “though they are never obscure, they are not transparent either” (id.: 238). This means that the “intractable, unreasonable stubbornness of factuality” (ibid.) speaks of the resistance of factuality to any necessity that might have been searched in it in modern philosophy. Factual truth depends upon factual evidence which is “established through eyewitnesses – notoriously unreliable – and by documents, and monuments, all of which can be suspected forgeries” (id.: 239). Yet, “a factual statement – Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914 – acquires political implications only by being put in an interpretive context” (id.: 245). Hence, facts are not political as such but only in relation to other facts – a relation which is again reflectively judged – they can turn out as being political.

Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm. Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute. In other words, factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation (Arendt 2006: 234).

By reading Arendt’s conception of political judgment without noting her insistence on factual truth, the hermeneutical part of her conception gets lost. She distinguishes factual truth from rational truth along the line of modern thinking:

The modern age, which believes that truth is neither given to nor disclosed to but produced by the human mind, has assigned, since Leibniz, mathematical, scientific, and philosophical truth to the common species of rational truth as distinguished from factual truth” (Arendt 2006: 226).

Yet, facts are only accessible by judgment, by bringing them to a general. Once noted, they are seen from a certain perspective, they are integrated into a narrative<sup>19</sup>. Arendt’s quote from William Faulkner “The past is never dead, in fact it’s not even past” (Arendt 2003a: 270), reflects best the retrospective relation of judgment to facts: that is, the present of judgment is related to the factual past. Through judgment, facts reach into the present – which corresponds to the second part of Arendt’s quote above.

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<sup>19</sup> On perspectivism in Arendt as inspired by Nietzsche, see Villa 1996: 80 f.; 1998: 116 f.

Factual truth is mediated by a storyteller, historian or novelist whose political function is “to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment” (Arendt 2006: 258). But in the meantime factual truth precludes debates, which are “the very essence of political life” (Arendt 2006: 241). Factual truth, “is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony ... It is political by nature” (Arendt 2006: 234).

Facts and events<sup>20</sup> are not subject to debates, yet they form the substance of debate. However, they can only be singled out as such, by being read, by being situated, by forming a political situation. Their reproduction in the formed opinion leads to plurality, yet a plurality that in each version entails factual truth. There isn't just one way to look at facts, and they are only given in their reproduction. As Arendt inquires:

But do facts, independent on opinion and interpretation, exist at all? Have not generations of historians and philosophers of history demonstrated the impossibility of ascertaining facts without interpretation, since they must first be picked of a chaos of sheer happenings (and the principles of choice are surely not factual data) and then be fitted into a story that can be told only in a certain perspective, which has nothing to do with the original occurrence? (Arendt 2006: 234)

Although Arendt points out to the interpretation of history, she does not problematize this aspect as such. She rather insists that these “perplexities” of historical science “are no argument against the existence of factual matter” (Arendt 2006: 234)<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, Arendt points at history being reinterpreted by every generation:

Even if we admit that every generation has the right to write its own history, we admit no more than that it has the right to rearrange the facts in accordance with its own perspective; we don't admit the right to touch the factual matter itself (Arendt 2006: 234).

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the difference between facts and events see Cioflec 2012. However, factual truth concerns both facts and events. For a brief distinction: Facts can be read as state of affairs, referring to events name historically relevant happenings, occurrences.

<sup>21</sup> Precisely because of Arendt's insistence on the factual matter, it remains debatable, whether for Arendt facts are “hybrids of interpretation and an event or state of affairs”, as Vasterling remarks (2007: 86, Fn. 5), although I agree that “most politically relevant discussion is about interpretation” (ibid.). Although only accessible through interpretation, facts for Arendt keep an independency from interpretation, which makes it possible to reinterpret them in different narrations or opinions.

Precisely here is the need for interpretation, as reinterpretation and re-evaluation of our truth can be highlighted as a hermeneutic responsibility that is also to be found in political judgment: reevaluating our truth<sup>22</sup>. The very emphasis of factual truth calls for this implicit position in Arendt: factual truth entails plurality and only by debating between the different perspectives can there be an incentive for political action to emerge. Whereas, Arendt insists on a certain “respect” for factual truth<sup>23</sup>. However, the prevalence of factual truth leads itself back to hermeneutic responsibility.

The claim of truth is second to the factual evidence of political facts or events, which as such do not enter the space of opinion and speech or debate in politics. Precisely the latter is the case, as they are such inaccessible or meaningless, becoming accessible only by forming an opinion. Since factual evidence is provided by eyewitnesses, documents and monuments, it can be distorted through misleading emphasis or “false testimony” (Arendt 2006: 239; see also Sari 2018: 154). Nevertheless, it is the “factual matter” that guides politics.

Political judgment relates to these facts, by translating them into situations for actions. Therefore, political situations are not free floating and merely imagined (as discussed above by productive imagination), rather they are reproduced. This is where they can be distorted, willingly or unwillingly, deliberately or accidentally. Whereas lies are always deliberated, falsehood also can rely on misinterpreting facts. It is hence questionable whether the opposite of factual truth is only the “deliberate falsehood or lies” (Arendt 2006: 228)<sup>24</sup>.

The prevalence of facts over the interpretation by which they are acknowledged provides guidance concerning Arendt’s emphasis on representative imagination<sup>25</sup>. As Arendt highlights: “Facts are beyond agreement and consent, and all talk about them – all exchanges of opinion based on correct information – will contribute nothing to their establishment” (Arendt 2006, 236). Facts remain unchanged and thereby, as Dana Villa comments, they have a despotic character,

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<sup>22</sup> Lies can only be lies as long as they are held for being true, and the same applies for undeliberated falsehood.

<sup>23</sup> As Monod puts it: “To put in a nutshell, Arendt’s argument would be the following: first, truth is *not* the only value in the political realm and especially in democracy, and in a certain way, one can say that *opinion*, more than «truth», is the real basis of democracy; *nevertheless*, the formation of opinion in a democracy *needs* a certain respect for «factual truth»” (Monod: 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Lies in politics are a central topic in Arendt’s analysis of Totalitarianism. For an account on deception in politics and the transformation of lies into truths by enacting them see Birmingham 2010.

<sup>25</sup> This distinction between facts and opinion distances Arendt from Nietzsche’s Perspectivism and theory of interpretation. See Villa 1996: 96.

yet not a specific one: “While from a doxastic perspective, it is possible to speak of the ‘despotism’ of factual truths this despotism is of a different order from the exercised by truth of reason or religion. The former provide non-political boundaries to the realms of opinion and persuasion, while the later invariably quash the plurality of perspectives that generates the ‘incessant discourse’ Arendt cherishes” (Villa 1996: 96).

Rootedness of the political in the factual, prevents imagination from detouring as productive imagination and then into the imaginary. Yet, the facticity of the factual remains undiscussed. It seems to be an unmediated, direct interaction with events. Arendt insistently warns of the dangers of image-making and the entailed deception (Arendt 2006: 250)<sup>26</sup>. Representative imagination however remains rooted in facts, other than productive imagination. Yet, precisely this double-bound of imagination reminds us that Arendt’s analysis is far from being prescriptive and offering an ultimate solution for sound judgment. As Robert Fine rightly points out, Arendt’s work does not aim at constructing a dialectic in which reflective judgment constitutes the bridge between thinking and willing (Fine 2008: 157). As much as the other faculties such as thinking which “can at any moment turn against itself” are to some extent inconsistent (Arendt 1978: 176; Fine 2008: 159), as much is reflective judgment also is exposed to failure. Read along this line, it seems that the risk of failing the aim by reflective judgment, namely judging on the particular, consists in its reliance on imagination.

Judgment, as conceived by Arendt, does not simply epistemically identify its object. Judgment relies on imagination and opinion. Also, judgment is representative, which means that it is characterized by its communicability and, to some extent, by its impartiality, which however is always situated<sup>27</sup>. The object of political judgment is situated in the public realm; the public realm, namely the realm of politics, entails judgments and, therefore, well-grounded opinions, and not some objective reality. Moreover, the object of political judgment is constituted by

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<sup>26</sup> Image-making in politics reaches out into an “entirely defactualized world” (Arendt 1972: 4). As Caruth points out, images transform “from the tool to the framework of the decision-making process” which “seems to involve a machinelike mechanism that makes reflection increasingly unlikely” (2010: 87).

<sup>27</sup> To highlight only one aspect, Aavitsland discusses the failure of judgment in being impartial by referring to disgust and by pointing at “the first moment of political judgment: the moment of appearance and the spontaneous judgment of sense” (2019: 542). She refers to Arendt’s Note in the *Denktagebuch*, translating it: “all experience is accompanied by an unspoken it-pleases-or-it-displeases me, precisely because what is experienced appears” (ibid.; Arendt, 2003b: 680). “es begleitet ein unausgesprochenes Es-gefällt-oder-misfällt-mir alle Erfahrung, eben weil das Erfahrene in Erscheinung tritt”.



judgment itself, which mediates facts. According to Yasemin Sari, the awareness of facts is to be unfolded as claiming “to (or of) truth”, forming an opinion and reaching an agreement or judgment, which constitutes the normative dimension of responsibility in public debate (2018).

The respect for factual truth indeed entails an epistemic responsibility<sup>28</sup> which itself refers back to the political and historical facts which cannot be overruled by opinions: “the surest sign of the factuality of facts and events is precisely this stubborn thereness, whose incoherent contingency ultimately defies all attempts at conclusive explanation” (Arendt 2006, 253).

The hermeneutic responsibility in political judgment is a constant reconsideration of factual truth, of facts and situatedness, meaning also direct interaction with the world and the others. The plurality of viewpoints, of interpretations and narrations are crucial, yet not fundamental to the public realm<sup>29</sup>, as Vasterling highlights in a few words:

The articulation of plural viewpoints is the illumination, from many different perspectives, of the same fragile, ephemeral and contingent web of human relationships, facts, and events – making it thereby more solid, more objective, more real. Without a plurality of stories about worldly matters, the world will first lose its character of commonality, then its meaningfulness, and finally, its reality (Vasterling 2007: 85).

The plurality of contingent viewpoints, however, is not itself contingent but necessary: it concerns that the retrieve of factual truth as an ongoing process in which facts need to be reconsidered<sup>30</sup>. Precisely for this reason, each generation

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<sup>28</sup> Noam Chomsky’s influential article on “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” started a still ongoing debate on epistemic responsibility. He claims: “It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies. This at least seems enough truism to pass over without comment. Not so, however. For the modern intellectual, it is not at all obvious” (Chomsky 1967). The challenges of epistemic responsibility refer mainly to epistemic justification and duty (Steup 2001; Fairweather & Zagzebski 2001). I will not discuss these diverse positions; my discussion is, with Arendt and closer to Chomsky, whether the spectator is in any relation to truth. Arendt’s ‘thinker’ is structurally closer to Chomsky’s ‘intellectual’. However, the epistemic responsibility of the spectator remains defined by a relation to truth as factual truth (See also: Sari, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Benhabib highlights the centrality of narratives for Arendt’s understanding of the past, the public space, and personal identity (1994). By favoring narrations, which focus on the particular, Arendt rejects generalizations, and even more so any fundamentalism.

<sup>30</sup> For Arendt narrations are at least complementary to theoretical explanations which fall short of contributing to a better understanding of political affairs (Luban 1994). Using eyewitnesses’ storytelling and narrations in which the stories converge for the retrieval of facts implies reconsidering interpretations all over again since their generality does not span over time and space as theories might claim for themselves.

rewrites history by recovering facts and appropriating the “factual matter”. In the same manner, political judgment needs to reconsider facts and to align them with other opinions in a specific situation. Hence, there is a hermeneutic responsibility in political judgment towards keeping factual truth alive, which means interpreting facts in view of political action<sup>31</sup>. Factual truth which cannot be aligned to possible action becomes estranged and distorted.

While political judgment rooted in facts provides generality for the contingent particular, it creates the public realm we share. Other than in knowledge, in political judgment the general includes freedom and possibilities. Rather than an “aesthetisation of politics” Arendt’s account is a political phenomenology of freedom (Marder 2013: esp. 307 f.). For Arendt the public realm is a constant process of readjusting the general to the particular, to the lived experience, to the situated yet unmediated, and preserves the freedom of individuals. This is a corrigible process depending on our judgment. For Arendt, the well-grounded communicated opinions constitute the public realm, and as Villa explains, judgment is a “creative activity...it will most likely be misunderstood and resented” (Villa 1999: 106). The hermeneutical responsibility therefore is to counteract misunderstandings and resentments by reinterpreting facts and actualizing factual truth.

## Conclusion

Arendt’s reading of the *Critique of Judgment* in view of a Kantian political philosophy mainly aims at considering particular facts in political practice. Her concern is for the freedom of the individuals as well as for the world they share as the public realm. The plurality of the acting individuals keeps the public realm alive. However, this public realm is created by the spectators who interpret facts and events in well-grounded opinions. The spectators provide an impartial generality for particular facts of direct interaction such that these can be communicated and lead to taking further action. Since this general perspective in political judgment is mediated by representative imagination, it only has exemplary validity. Also, its reliance on testimony and narrations entails that a general perspective can always

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<sup>31</sup> A certain analogy to Vattimo’s claim for hermeneutical responsibility, as discussed by George cannot be overlooked: “Vattimo [...] suggests that our hermeneutical responsibility demands that we participate in emancipatory politics that challenges agreed-upon truths” (George 2020: 2). However, the hermeneutical responsibility entailed by Arendt’s conception does not point at breaking with the paradigms of the time, but rather hints at each time creating the political realm by reconsidering factual truth.

misinterpret facts. Moreover, the political situation of the spectator leads to a specific judgment of the facts. All of these frailties of the political judgment call for a hermeneutical responsibility of reinterpreting facts all over again. Furthermore, since factual truth only shows in view of actions to follow, it has to be retrieved unceasingly. Hermeneutical responsibility for factual truth is a responsibility for action in view of freedom.

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