

Hannah Arendt, Michael Denny, and the Politics of Taste

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Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was perhaps the most important thinker in recent times to examine the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Arendt contemplated how a kind of mental activity she variously called *judgment* and/or *taste* might link political and aesthetic life, insofar as both can be conceived as domains of evaluation and self-display that solicit evaluation from others.¹ Her thinking about this topic came to be oriented around a re-interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), some results of which are contained in her *Lectures On Kant's Political Philosophy*, given in 1971 but published only posthumously in 1982. Arendt's political thinking has become increasingly salient in recent years in both academia and the non-academic public sphere, with scholars such as Jonathan Peter Schwartz, D. N. Rodowick, Linda Zerrilli, and Martin Blumenthal-Barby contributing to a growing awareness of the importance of judgment and aesthetics to her political thought.

Part of Arendt's appeal to such thinkers is that she seems to confront with special clarity and urgency the problem that contemporary liberal democracy appears disconnected from traditional sources of political (collective) and ethical (individual) orientation. Liberal democracy thus seems vulnerable to the sort of dangerous pseudo-solutions developed in the twentieth century by the movements and regimes she analyzed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Arendt's work, however, challenges doctrinaire liberalism. Her insistence—not least in her thinking about judgment—that there are common features linking political, ethical, and aesthetic life creates difficulties for any rigid distinction between a private sphere on the one hand and a public/political sphere on the other (difficulties, indeed, for Arendt's own attempts to distinguish between the two, which feature heavily in her writings from the 1950s).

Much of liberal thought is routed through some version of an apparently foundational claim about the rights that all individuals possess as members of a common humanity, and through a vision of politics as aiming at the protection of these rights. Arendt's conception of politics, however, is founded on her appreciation of human beings as distinct, unique individuals who share not so much a generic *nature* (in which *natural* rights might be grounded) as a shared propensity, variously expressing itself, to delight in the company of other individuals through the evaluation of remarkable objects, deeds, evaluations and people. Arendt's concern to resist what she analyzed as totalitarianism—and to resist the conditions of modern society that she argued made totalitarianism possible and, for many, attractive—arose from the catastrophic negation of this special human propensity, and the human diversity, spontaneity and plurality from which it arises.

A redefinition of liberalism along Arendtian lines—or an argument for why such a redefinition would be desirable—is not on the agenda for this essay. I will assert, merely, that Arendt's conception of human flourishing—in which the possibilities for the free self-display and mutual evaluation of unique individuals are secured by structures, practices and discourses respecting the shared human propensity for that display and evaluation—might be brought into alignment with liberals' traditional self-understanding as

the guardians of a proper balance between the freedom of individuals on the one hand and, on the other, the stability of systems designed to guarantee the universal application of rights that follow logically from recognition of a common human nature (whether the latter is conceived as a product of divine intent, or of our capacities as rational and language-using beings). Such an alignment would have to overcome a number of challenges, not least Arendt's frequently aired contempt for what she called liberalism; these will not be overcome here.

This essay will instead offer a new perspective on Arendt's thinking about politics and aesthetics through the lens offered by the work of one of her students during his brief academic career. That work, which sought to push Arendt's Kantian concept of *judgment* closer towards a pre-Kantian concept of *taste*, enables us to take note of a number of generative or problematic aspects of her thought. First, her shifting attention to the *tradition(s)* and contexts that form the horizon of judgment. Second, her conceptualization of judgment as a *faculty*. Third, the connection between judgment and *action*, and between Arendt's thinking about action and that of her friend Harold Rosenberg. Finally, the role of *imagination*, and specific ascetic practices of imagining, in the cultivation of judgment.

DENNENY

An intriguing exposition of the interrelated characteristics of Arendt's judgment—and a subtle critique of the ways in which Arendt's reliance on the Kantian tradition tended to obstruct her own thinking and explanation of them—can be found in the work of Michael Denny (1943–2023), who was her student at the University of Chicago. First under her supervision as an undergraduate in the interdisciplinary Fundamentals major, and then as graduate student in the similarly interdisciplinary Committee on Social Thought, Denny worked from 1968 to 1973 on a dissertation about the history of the concept of taste. The dissertation was originally intended to trace this concept from the work of Balthasar Gracian (1601–1658), who extended the meaning of “taste” from the physical sensation of gustation to a metaphorized combination of sensation, aesthetic experience, and ethical conduct in relation to feelings, objects and other people.

The dissertation was to follow the development of “taste” as far as Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. The dissertation would have explained how an early modern concept of taste, in many ways similar to Arendt's own thinking about judgment, emerged in the work of Gracian, circulated in Western European aesthetic, ethical and political thinking for the following two centuries, and then was disassembled in Kant's philosophy. The latter elaborates such apparently distinct concepts as taste (pure and impure), judgment (deliberate and reflective), judgments of taste, as well as the pleasant as opposed to the beautiful as opposed to the sublime. In the course of his writing, however, Denny developed an interpretation of taste—and of Arendt's concept of judgment—that, as we will see, took Kant's turn to be a mistake, by which modern philosophy lost hold of what was most generative about the earlier tradition's more expansive (albeit vaguer) conception of taste.

The wittiest critique of the ramifying distinctions at play in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which seem to collapse whenever Kant tries to apply them to examples such as flowers or artworks, can be found in Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting (La Vérité en peinture)*, 1978). The most thorough analysis of the disadvantages of Kant's approach compared to its early modern forebears can be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960).² Rather than elaborating any such critique himself, Denny (perhaps because his advisor was at the time of his dissertating growing increasingly committed to the routing of her thinking about judgment through Kant's *Third Critique*) chose instead to abandon his thesis before arriving at Kant. After writing three chapters, culminating in an analysis of the political and ethical implications of the aesthetics of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), he quit his doctoral program. He moved to New York City and became a leading editor and publisher of gay literature, contributing to the careers of writers like Andrew Holleran, Larry Kramer, and Edmund White, and to the broader emergence of a gay cultural and political movement which he theorized, in essays for the gay magazine *Christopher*

Street and elsewhere, in terms adapted from Arendt's political theory and the earlier example of her activism in Zionist movements during the 1940s.

That adaptation, its consequences for the development of contemporary gay identity in the United States, and its implications for the present, are beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, this essay will follow Denny's interpretation of Arendt's ideas of judgment, and his implicit reworking of them. It will focus on how Denny seeks to recover the fundamental *sociability* and *worldliness* of judgment, and to draw the notion of judgment back into its early modern proximity with *taste*, as theorized by Gracian, Shaftesbury and other thinkers for whom politics, ethics and aesthetics were interrelated phenomena rather than distinct spheres. Making use of Denny's dissertation, this essay will rely primarily on an article written by Denny a few years after Arendt's death, "The Privilege of Ourselves: Hannah Arendt on Judgment" (1979). Often cited today in the literature on Arendt's thinking about judgment, the article links, beginning with its title, this thinking not to Kant and the *Critique of Judgment*, but rather to Shaftesbury, whose phrase "the privilege of ourselves" appealed to Denny—as we will see—as a motto for a conceptualization of aesthetics, ethics, and politics as linked by concrete, context-bound practices of judgment developed through a kind of imaginative asceticism modeled on worldly conversation.

TRIAL OF JUDGMENT

"The Privilege of Ourselves" begins by claiming that Arendt's consideration of judgment arose out of her 1961 reporting on the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker*. Her discussion of the trial, of Eichmann's moral personality, and the "banality of evil" which it seemed to exemplify, are perhaps now the most famous aspects of her career—and were, at the time Denny started studying under Arendt in the early 1960s, controversial, if not infamous, among academics and the wider public. It would seem natural that the trial and controversy might prompt Arendt to think further about judgment, insofar as the trial itself was, literally, a matter of a man being judged, and insofar as her writing about the trial—and the response to her writing—were also exercises of judgment in what we're accustomed to calling the court of public opinion.

Denny picks up this thought further along in the essay, restaging how the trial of Adolf Eichmann for his role in the Holocaust seemed to require fresh thinking about the nature of judgment. Arendt, he observes, found that Eichmann was capable of following the rules operative in his society. Not only that, he followed his *conscience*—the voice of duty that compels us to follow such rules. Neither moral and political norms nor an inner command, thus, appear as guarantees against individuals participating in the most horrific violence towards others. After all, if our community's standards are evil, our internalization of them as conscience is hardly likely to be moral; we would need, to resist evil, to be capable of some sort of inner conversation with imaginary interlocutors that provide different perspectives through which those standards, and our internalization of them, might be relativized.

This, however, anticipates the course of Denny's reading of Arendt through Shaftesbury toward the conclusion of the essay (and in his dissertation). For the moment, let us begin with Denny as he notes at the essay's outset that in Arendt's analysis, if we want to prevent such evil from happening—and avoid participating in it ourselves—we need to consider what ethical resources might exist beyond either the elaboration of more sophisticated rules or the strengthening of conscience. We need, Arendt reasoned, to elaborate a capacity to "judge matters of right and wrong... without reliance on the general code established by society... without reference to a general concept or universal rule" (date, page). The best model for such judgment that Arendt found in the history of philosophy appeared in "Kant's reflective judgment" as elaborated in his *Critique of Pure Judgment* in relation to aesthetics. Her "seizure of part of Kant's esthetic philosophy for morality," Denny suggested, was something of an act of theoretical bricolage, taking up a fragment of someone else's system in order to fill the gap left by the failure of collective norms and individual conscience (Denny 1979, p. 255).

Reflective judgment, in Kant's philosophy, is what we rely on in situations that do not call for "determinative judgment," or "the ability to subsume the particular under a general concept or rule" (Denny

1979, p. 255). For Kant, the paradigmatic cases of reflective judgment concern aesthetics, especially our evaluations of a given object as beautiful. In saying that something is beautiful, we do not have a clear concept of what beauty is, or access to rules about how to determine what should be considered beautiful. And yet we do not, in saying so, take ourselves to be saying merely that the beautiful object appears beautiful to us; beauty is experienced somehow doubly as objective (it is *in* the object) and as resistant to conceptualization. Moreover, we take our evaluation of the object as beautiful to be normative, valid for all other reasonable observers—even as we recognize that, in fact, our actual interlocutors do not necessarily agree with our evaluation. We cannot account for, in terms that would be compelling to anyone, what makes this object beautiful, yet to evaluate something is to say that it *should* be evaluated as beautiful by anyone else.³

The Eichmann trial motivated Arendt, on Denny's account, to consider whether, given the failure of moral and political norms (and the notion of conscience), which rely on concepts and rules, to prevent historical catastrophes, we might be better served if we think about morality and politics as similar to aesthetics. If we accept that Arendt's turn to the problem of judgment was prompted by her experience of the Eichmann trial—and the subsequent controversy that greeted her initial essays on the topic, which struck many readers as offensive in its supposed reduction of Eichmann's crimes to a generic case of a philosophical problem—then we can consider this turn as having multiple contexts. Her thematization of judgment began with a concrete example of a trial, which to her own judgment failed to raise the correct issues about Eichmann.

Her published expressions of this judgment met with widespread condemnation from fellow scholars and writers, who exercised their own judgments in writings directed against her views. Arendt did not reflect explicitly on that condemnation in her later work—nor did Denny. Yet we might speculate on its impact, insofar as it offered them both further grounds to consider both the affordances and the limitations of judgment as exercised in the public sphere by the particular character of the public intellectual. Arendt, after all, had departed early in life from a traditional academic career, and become by the time of the Eichmann trial an increasingly visible critic in publications such *The New Yorker*. Given how much of her thinking was concerned with a critique of traditional philosophers' rejection of worldly involvement, the status of her own engagement with the world of public opinion, her attempts to speak truth to a large audience, must have, at times, given her pause—especially as she became a controversial, even notorious public figure. That she did not, then, in her own writing address (in the manner of Michel Foucault's late lectures on *parrhesia* and Kant) whether, or how, such a figure can communicate with her audience—how, that is, judgment can or should be exercised within our media systems—seems a strange silence, one that Denny, in a sense, responds to by becoming himself a media entrepreneur.

As a member of an audience of a trial, as a writer, and as a philosopher, Arendt, in thinking about judgment was located in overlapping discursive and social contexts. Yet, as Denny notes, Arendt often presented judgment as if it appeared in moments when such contexts failed to adhere. Judgment, she seemed to say, is in one sense what we turn to when rules—either in the form of logic valid for all rational beings or in the form of culturally specific norms—are absent. It is, in another and possibly related sense, a desperately needed intellectual, ethical and political resource in our present historical moment when “all traditional moral authority” has collapsed. Lacking tradition, we need judgment more than ever—and need more than ever to think about what judgment *is* (Denny 1979, p. 259).

Throughout her work, Arendt often posited that the tragedies of the early twentieth century represented a crisis of our intellectual and political tradition after which it was no longer possible, or at least no longer appropriate, to appeal to past authorities for guidance. Indeed, it was this sense of stepping into a new, perhaps unprecedented historical horizon that seems to have, in part, motivated her interest in judgment as a mode of mental activity that does not rely on authoritative norms. Yet Arendt's notion of judgment depends on interlocutors being able to communicate judgments to each other in the mutual hope of persuasion. Interlocutors must share, obviously, a common language, as well as many assumptions, rhetorical techniques, an understanding of what counts as a good argument, etc. They must, to whatever degree, be part of what could be called a community or indeed a tradition. To say as much is not to say that

there might not have been a catastrophic breakdown of one particular, highly significant and long efficacious “tradition” in Western culture occurring in the early twentieth century. It is only to note that, our even saying this much is already to presuppose that author and reader now share such “traditions” as the English language and a certain familiarity with, in fact, the outlines of Western intellectual history—it is inescapably within the latter that we can even discuss its possible breakdown or transformation.

There is, Denny suggests, a worrisome tendency in Arendt’s thinking about judgment to conflate the absence of fixed rules and clear concepts with the absence of “tradition” and “orientation.” The latter, in fact, are what make judgment in the absence of fixed rules and clear concepts possible at all—and what make possible the theorization of judgment by thinkers like Denny and Arendt. Moreover, Denny notes, Arendt was herself thinking within a particular tradition when she opted for Kant and his concept of reflective judgment as the channel through which to pursue her own thinking. Denny locates Kant—and implicitly Arendt, insofar as she thinks with Kant—as exemplars of “professional philosophy,” which attempts to define reality “in conceptual terms.” Philosophy appears as the minting of definitions—such as the distinction between reflective and determinative judgments.

In contrast, Denny notes, “if Kant had been an Englishman,” he might have developed an account of judgment grounded in the practice of English common law, “where a jury pronounces in each given case what is just, though nobody has an idea of what *justice* is... a sense for justice develops through case precedents much as a taste for beauty develops through the appreciation of exemplary models of artistic excellence” (Denny 1979, p. 263). A number of important points appear in quick succession here. First, Denny locates Kant’s thought—even as we access it today, from within our own horizon—in specific disciplinary and national or cultural contexts. Second, he appeals to an ongoing tradition of practice, English common law and the jury system, in order to suggest that we are, as anglophones, familiar already with the way in which judgment can take place in the absence of the sort of well-defined concepts considered necessary among professional philosophers. Third, he identifies the moral and political application of judgment in a trial—and a trial, after all, is what brought Arendt to consider judgment and appeal to Kant—to the aesthetic application of taste in the appreciation of art.

Taste, when understood in its deployment within specific historical, cultural, professional, etc., contexts, is always-already *traditional* insofar as it cannot operate without recourse to, and prior formation by, examples. Thinking of evaluation in terms of taste, Denny suggests, helps to recognize that, however dire the crisis of authority created by the catastrophes of modern history, we do in fact find ourselves within traditions that make it possible to make evaluations without the use of definite concepts, whether in the courtroom or the art gallery—and that we find ourselves making choices *among* traditions and among exemplary bearers of traditions, choosing (perhaps wrongly) to think, for example, with Kant and professional philosophy rather than the practice of common law.

Denny suggests, moreover, that each of us is always judging in multiple contexts. He argues in an early footnote that Arendt’s thinking on judgment, even as it was prompted by specific historical events and routed through modern German philosophy was also “fundamentally grounded” in the writing she had done in the 1930s and 40s reflecting “on her own concrete position as a Jew in the modern age” (Denny 1979, p. 271). This attention to how an individual’s biography and location in history and society endow her with a specific repertory of styles of judgment and topics of concern reappears, significantly, at the end of Denny’s article, when he sets up an opposition between Shaftesbury and Kant.

Denny found that Arendt’s thinking about judgment began with a trial, moved through public controversy, and then, as it were, went astray into “professional philosophy” without returning to worldly existence. The suspicion that the context(s) of judgment slipped out of Arendt’s thinking seems to lie behind his assertion that there was a “strange irony” in Arendt’s turn to consider judgment as a phenomenon, and that it unfolded “surprisingly.” While it seemed as though judgment were what she wanted to consider in the years following the Eichmann trial, throughout a series of texts and lectures over the following decade and a half, “a discussion of this faculty was constantly postponed,” while she dealt with what she presented as the necessary preliminary work analyzing “thinking” and “willing” (particularly in

her two-volume posthumously published series *The Life of the Mind*, which a volume on judging was supposed to complete) in a manner Denny notes was not satisfactory. At the time of her death in 1975, Arendt had just started writing what was to have been a book on judgment, of which we have only the title pages, with two epigrams (only one of which Denny analyzed, or even translated) and Denny added, “the intent” (Denny 1979, pp. 245-246).

Before following Denny’s reconstruction of Arendt’s intention, however, we should consider, at the risk of digression, a point of terminology.

FACULTY

Arendt construed “judging” or “judgment,” Denny notes, as a “faculty,” that is, as a distinct class of mental operations alongside two other such classes, “thinking” and “willing.” These faculties were inherited by Arendt from the history of philosophy, and have no relation to the empirical findings or conceptual schemes of modern psychology. One might well be suspicious of philosophy’s long tradition of claiming a capacity for defining the boundaries of supposedly specific forms of mental activity through a process of ratiocination disconnected with what we might take to be more scientific (or at any rate, non-philosophical) ways of knowing. Arendt herself was in many ways a critic of the pretensions of philosophy, which she often presented as an unworldly, self-regarding, isolated enterprise that had cut its intellectualizations adrift from such phenomena as politics. Moreover, she was critical of the failures of philosophers such as her own mentor Martin Heidegger to break with philosophy’s tendency to arrogant self-enclosure. Nevertheless, she relied on aspects of modern German philosophical tradition, such as the conceit of delimiting “faculties” of mind and describing, in ideal terms, their functioning through a combination of examples drawn from ordinary life and citations from philosophers.

Arendt’s work on each of the three faculties she studied (*thinking*, *willing*, *judging*), however, tended to undermine both philosophical commonplaces about them, and the conceptual clarity of the faculty in question. Although this is beyond the scope of the present essay to demonstrate, her book *Thinking* (1977), criticizes philosophy from Plato to Heidegger for valorizing thought over action, and tends, if carefully read, to question whether there in fact can be a sharp distinction drawn—as so many philosophers have drawn it—between our ordinary engagement with the world, and its objects and inhabitants, on the one hand, and, on the other, the supposedly isolated, placeless and timeless mental activity celebrated by philosophers as thinking or contemplation.

Here and across much of her other writing, Arendt suggests that our emotions and everyday apparently unreflective modes of comportment contain aspects of mental activity too often considered exclusive to self-conscious “thinking.” These aspects include tacit appeals to norms; e.g., a display of anger contains the thought that the situation observed calls for anger on the part of other people—that is to say, the emotion contains, or simply *is*, a normative moral claim. Her book *Willing* is even more striking in its critique of the self-evidence of the phenomenon examined. It is not clear, by the end of the book, whether Arendt means to criticize a lineage of Christian and modern political philosophy that, according to her, over-privileges “the will” relative to other human faculties, or whether she means to suggest that “the will” (and a whole suite of associated concepts in modern German philosophy, such as “values” and “sovereignty”) ought not to be imagined as a distinct faculty at all, not least because of the pernicious political and moral consequences of such a conception of mind.

Denny approaches this dilemma by arguing that Arendt “understood that there was a valid experiential ground” for the modern valorization of will during “the past three centuries.” Indeed, he suggests that there is always “some experiential ground” for the emergence of new ideas, or the increasing salience of old ideas, in the history of philosophy, even if they are, in fact, delusory. Insofar as thinking always arises out of, and is engaged in interpreting, particular contexts of individual and collective experience, it corresponds to some historical reality. “Philosophers may be silly,” he argues, but they’re not so “silly” as to develop a tradition—like the tradition of “will” running through modern German thought—that does not

in some manner correspond to aspects of human existence as it changes over time (Denneny 1979, p. 274). In that sense, thinking and willing might be understood not as unchanging faculties always present in an ahistorical “mind,” nor again as themes of philosophical discussion that have been debated for millennia, but rather as variable aspects of the ongoing self-interpretation of historically evolving communities, coming into discourse at particular moments to help make sense of contingent experiences—but remaining, perhaps, in our philosophical repertory long after those experiences have passed.

What Arendt was doing in *Thinking* and *Willing* might be redescribed not as investigation of particular faculties, or studies of what has been said about them in the history of philosophy of mind, but rather as investigations of that repertory, understood not only as a list of concepts but also a set of possible personae through which mental activity is conducted. One such persona, *the thinker*—a figure who by the power of contemplation sets himself at least temporarily apart from the unthinking multitude—has long exercised intellectual charisma through various strategies of ostentatious withdrawal from “the many” and subsequent, usually garrulously pedagogical, return back to them. The prophet of *will* is a more recent figure, associated with modern German thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger who preach a doctrine of somehow transforming oneself through an inflection of everyday existence, whether through an experience of art that suspends ordinary life, or a practice of meditating on “eternal recurrence” or one’s own death (it might be observed that all three options are barely secularized spiritual exercises familiar from the history of religion).

By shifting consideration from the *faculty* of thinking or willing to the *persona* associated with it, we no longer have to ask whether there “really” is such a thing as thinking or willing, understood as a “thing” or activity localizable or specifiable in some definite region of the “mind.” We no longer, accordingly, have to ask whether Arendt believes or ought to have believed in the existence of such a faculty. We can consider, rather, what she says about the conduct enabled, at different points in history, by the evolving personae of “the one who thinks” and “the one who preaches will.” Extending that consideration here would be beyond our scope, but it will help us to keep in mind what Denneny is doing in his reconstruction of Arendt’s views on “judging” or “judgment,” which, in light of what has just been said, could also be understood as her views on the figure of *the judge* or *the one who judges*.

Denneny’s revision of Arendt, as we will see, hinges on his greater attention to judgment as something performed in specific social contexts, and by means of functioning traditions. Judgment also, it will be seen, was linked in his thinking to the power of imagination, and to specific practices of imagination by which individuals taken on, in their inner dialogue, different personae. To judge, in his account, is to assume one or more particular characters, to play one or more particular parts, performing in an ongoing drama. While this account is, in the main, consonant with Arendt’s, her emphasis on judgment as a *faculty* tends to obscure the social, historical, and imaginative dimensions of judgment, making her attempts to pull out of the trajectory of modern philosophy more difficult than they need have been. Before considering this, however, we should return to Denneny’s reconstruction of Arendt’s “intent” in writing about judgment, as he divined it from his interpretation of the first epigram to her barely-started book *Judging*.

EPIGRAM

This epigram was taken from the Roman poet Lucan’s epic *Pharsalia* and reads: “The victorious cause pleases the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato.” Denneny, in this instance, wrongly attributes the quotation to Cato himself, although it is said by the poet, not by the historical person Cato. The error is a strange one, since the remark, as Denneny notes, was quite important for Arendt’s thinking, not only about judgment, but also a host of related matters, connected to what she saw as the fundamental power of human observers to admire the acts of fellow human beings, even though these acts, like the actors who perform them, are subject to death and failure.⁴

This line of thought was something Arendt attributed not only to Cato but to the wisdom of the Greco-Roman tradition, or at least to what she constellated as its most relevant teachings. A version of the

idea appears, without reference to Cato—or Lucan—in *The Human Condition* (1958), in a passage meditating on Thucydides’ report of Pericles’ funeral oration to the Athenian assembly, in which, on Arendt’s interpretation of Pericles’ lesson, the ultimate glory of Athens is said to depend not on its victory over its enemies but to be independent of any future historical outcome. Arendt hails the “supreme confidence that men can enact *and* save their greatness at the same time and, as it were, by one and the same gesture, and that the performance as such will be enough” (Arendt 1958, p. 205).

Here a mode of comportment called *enactment* or *action*, a special intensity of human doing, in the hyperbolic rhetoric of Thucydides’ Pericles, is able to bypass the need for spectators, judges, historians, poets, or other such figures to evaluate and remember it. Arendt, however, amends this to note that “greatness” of action calls for (and does indeed seem to require) positive evaluation and perpetuation in our imagination. Greatness, she argues, is shown by Homer’s treatment of the losing Trojans and by the confidence of Thucydides’ Pericles in the face of the possibility of defeat, to consist in what is novel, “extraordinary,” peculiarly striking and shining, unique. What is great draws and holds our attention, and insofar as it is great its “innermost meaning... is independent of victory and defeat and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by their consequences for better or worse” (ibid.).

Arendt was struck by the power of a human capacity, exemplified by certain classical Greek and Roman authors, to admire *action* independent of success, results, or consequences, purely insofar as an act discloses the greatness of the one who performs it. And, it might be added, the magnanimity and perspicacity of those who admire it; Arendt was no less interested in the greatness of Homer and Thucydides, whose beautiful words were a kind of action, than she was in the greatness of Hector and Pericles, who we only know, after all, through the poet and historian, respectively. Arendt, admiring all four, and through them admiring humanity, becomes herself something of a poet-historian, retelling exemplary episodes of past greatness in order to awaken her audience’s wonder and, possibly, emulation.

Lucan’s line about Cato, then, served Arendt as one of a series of pieces of literary evidence indicating that the fundamental view about human life that her intellectual career was spent in developing was understood and operative in classical antiquity. It served as a crystallization of the perspective she wanted to instill in readers. It functioned, depending on the text, in connection variously with *judgment* (her last, unfinished book), *thinking* (volume one of the *Life of the Mind*), or themes of *action* (*The Human Condition*). The inter-penetration of these supposedly distinct phenomena (which Arendt sometimes claimed was her task to delineate) becomes apparent by comparison of these texts. Lucan’s line (along with similar citations from Thucydides and others) worked as an example to drive Arendt’s point that we act and evaluate each other’s action without indexing our admiration to some definite standard that could be called “success” or be reduced to either quantitative measure or historical-political efficacy.

The citation from Lucan, moreover, would have had a particular significance for Denny, since it was discussed at length in a key work of Dominique Bouhours, the seventeenth century French Jesuit whose contributions to the theorization of “taste” are the topic of the first half of the second chapter of Denny’s dissertation. Denny saw Bouhours as a central figure in an “almost forgotten tradition” that revealed taste at play in our aesthetic, ethical and political life, much in the same manner that Arendt tried to reveal, via Kant, that judgment was at play across these domains.

Bouhours is best known for putting into circulation the idea that there is in an object of taste—an object that pleases or displeases us—a *je ne sais quoi* (“I don’t know what”) responsible for our experience (Denny 1973 A, p. 2). The *je ne sais quoi* may seem to be a bit of verbal obfuscation (and rather far afield from Lucan) but consider that we are disagreeing about a painting’s beauty, meaning, etc., we take ourselves to be disagreeing *about something* that is not reducible to what is happening in either of our brains. Yet that something is not given to objective, empirical verification, or to a logical procedure of conceptual clarification by which we can put an end to our disagreement.

Objects of taste have a peculiar character. They seem to invite us to talk about them. We want to say to a dining companion, for example, that the steak is delicious, the wine robust, the vegetables too salty. The conversations initiated by such remarks can continue for some length of time, revealing both features

of the objects that had been ignored (notice the subtle flavor of the sauce...) and of the criteria used by the interlocutors (I, for one, love a salty vegetable...), and seem thus to be getting *somewhere*. Yet, far from terminating in either a definite understanding of the objects discussed or the concepts employed, these discussions often end in aporia. “The essence of the *je ne sais quoi*,” Denny argues, “is that it is unknowable” (Denny 1973 A, p. 3).

Bouhours might seem to be prefiguring Kant, and a tradition of modern German philosophy that attempts to define the limits of what can be known, and therefore to set limits to what should be said. But the *je ne sais quoi* is not a definite frontier to discourse or to knowledge. Its “unknowability is of a distinct kind.” It is “not the unknowability of the thing in itself,” which in Kant’s epistemology is the unknowable origin behind our experience of things. The unknowability of the *je ne sais quoi* “derives its meaning from its contrary, knowability, which in the heyday of Cartesianism means the ability to define, to delineate in clear and distinct ideas.” The *je ne sais quoi* cannot be “conceptually encapsulated,” like a proper concept—nor is it a concept of a special, funky, open-ended kind, as Hans Blumenberg treats, for example, metaphor in his own efforts to get out of the impasses of German philosophy (to say nothing of the non-teleological vagaries of Theodor Adorno).

The *je ne sais quoi* is “not a thing” that sits on the other side of a boundary of knowledge, like an item in a sealed box, nor is it a concept-like mental tool. Rather it is a “fundamentally different kind of reality,” a way in which things appear to us, that might be compared to “sunlight.” We attempt to communicate this mode of appearance to other people by pointing to aspects of the things that it makes appear, and in doing so we may succeed at getting our interlocutors oriented in such a way as to experience the mode for themselves. But how this communication of non-objectifiable modes, or moods, takes place is not reducible to a process bound to concepts, facts, or, *pace* Kant, universal normative injunctions. It is not possible to set knowable limits to the domain of matters about which individuals can properly aspire to knowledge; rather the *je ne sais quoi* functions as an inexhaustible—because not fully conceptualizable—incitation to further discourse. I cannot *know* what exactly it is that I enjoy in an object of taste, but I can find endlessly more to say about it, and this talking with interlocutors about the object will doubtless unfold to me new, previously unknown, aspects of its reality. I can see more and more in its sunlight, without thereby coming to any conceptual mastery of what that sunlight *is*.

Given the nature of the *je ne sais quoi*, we should attempt to understand it better not through philosophical procedures of conceptual clarification, which are bound to fail, but through the same sort of procedures by which, as Denny observed of the tradition of jury trials, we sharpen our sense of justice: by bringing out examples. In his *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit* (1687) Bouhours modeled for readers how taste, in its relation to the *je ne sais quoi* that incites discourse about a given object of taste, might work by following, over the course of four dialogues, conversations between two friends, Eudoxe and Philanthe. These two aesthetes compare their judgments about various literary works that they admire or dislike. Their first and most substantive discussion concerns a recent translation of Lucan, particularly his most famous line: “*Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni*.” Eudoxe and Philanthe worry about how this sentiment could be properly expressed in French, and in a Christian context, where it might sound dangerously like Cato is defying God. They discuss, for some pages, how the French translator failed in this respect, and consider how translation must balance fidelity to the original language with fidelity to the sentiments Lucan meant to inspire.

Within the horizon of Bouhours’ concerns, Lucan’s line about Cato shows how even apparently minor considerations of the exercise of taste within the literary field rise to ethical, social and even theological concerns. The *je ne sais quoi* is not, thus, a small leftover something-or-other outside the purview of serious (that is, philosophical) thought—indeed, it reaches beyond our literary pleasures to the heavens. We do not learn about the *je ne sais quoi*, in conceptual terms, from reading Bouhours’ dialogues—but we might learn how to conduct ourselves more appropriately in relation to the whole range of matters in which taste is concerned, from Latin poetry to respect for God. Denny’s dissertation, likewise, aims to show that

what may seem operations of purely aesthetic “taste” participate in the same structure of “judgment” that Arendt found in the stirring rhetoric of Lucan’s Cato or Thucydides’ Pericles.

When we consider the case of judgment having to do with war and genocide, we are perhaps likely to be distraught by the magnitude of the objects to be judged and by the lack of fixed standards to which we could appeal. It might seem, amid such distress, repellingly frivolous to compare such cases to the problems of ordering in a restaurant or picking out an outfit. But one advantage that might come from thinking about judgment in such cases as a particularly high-stakes expression of the dynamics of *taste* as we use it constantly in ordinary, everyday life, might be that we can consider the workings of our evaluative activity without moral-political histrionics or expressions of woe about our historical plight.

ACTION AND THE ELEMENTAL CONDITIONS

Having followed the course of the lines of thought initiated by Lucan’s epigram, let us return to the beginning of Denny’s essay, to a passage in which “with the wisdom of hindsight” he declares what the “whole corpus” of Arendt’s thought, including her thinking about judgment, most fundamentally concerned: “the concept of action and the significance of judgment in the world of opinion.” The sentence reorients Arendt’s analysis of judgment away from its relationship to the “faculties” of thinking and willing to set it instead in relation to action “as well as its elemental conditions—natality, mortality, and plurality,” drawing largely from *The Human Condition*. Denny argues that the pair *action-judgment*, and the triplicate set of features common to human beings *natality-mortality-plurality* reveals the “internal unity” of Arendt’s thought (Denny 1979, p. 247-8).

Action, he remarks in a footnote, is a concept Arendt shared with her friend and colleague (both at the University of Chicago Committee on Social Thought, and at *The New Yorker*) the art critic Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978). Denny was familiar with Rosenberg’s thought, having taken several classes with him at Chicago, and served as an editor, through the University of Chicago Press, for a number of Rosenberg’s books; indeed he was Rosenberg’s literary executor after his death.⁵ Rosenberg was, throughout the 50s, 60s, and 70s, one of America’s most well-known art critics, famous for his interpretation of Abstract Expressionist paintings in terms of “action,” a concept that for him had a distinctly existential import, and which he also applied in a number of essays tracking his evolution from an idiosyncratic Marxist to an independent, post-ideological critic of political commonplaces. Denny remarks:

“virtually *all* of Rosenberg’s work—the art criticism as well as the general essays on society, literature and politics—is of enormous relevance to anyone interested in Arendt’s thought, for the thread that runs through everything he writes like ‘an obsession [is] the identity of an actor, individual or collective, sham or genuine, forming itself through acts’ (Preface to *Act and the Actor*, p. xxi). He and Arendt are the most important contemporary thinkers on the nature of action... I’m not aware that anyone has pointed out their unique convergence, from different perspectives, on this one theme” (Denny 1979, p. 271).

The connections between Arendt and Rosenberg’s notions of action, which begin emerging in their thought around the time of the beginnings of their friendship in the early 50s, have still not been the object of significant study. This essay can only gesture toward them. Both Rosenberg and Arendt, however, can be said to have turned to the concept of action out of a desire to distinguish between modes of human comportment that seem to consist simply of automatic behavior determined by, for example, instinct, psychological compulsion, or unreflective obedience to norms, clichés, and other sorts of social technologies. Action, crucially, is *not* to be identified by either thinker with something like the insights won through a proper mode of reflection, whether on one’s own nature, death, art, and other objects of traditional philosophical contemplation or spiritual exercises.

Action is not premised on an insight—that is, on a result of thinking—at all, but may indeed precede reflection. It is something that we *do*, and which only afterwards we—or other people—come to understand; it might be characterized rather as something that happens through us or is done to us. What we understand about action, always in retrospect, is that it shows us to have an “identity,” a character that can

be evaluated. Action has more to do with the dramaturgy of classical tragedy, in which characters come, at last, to understand the real significance of what they have been doing insofar as that discloses who they truly are, than with modalities of philosophy and religion wherein individuals gain access by intellectual means to a truth in light of which they seek to reorganize their lives and reinterpret the world.

Traditional philosophy—even as far down as Heidegger—might distinguish a valorized mode of comportment, characterized variously as authentic, self-conscious, free, etc., from a less heroic one characterized as typical of inauthentic, unreflective, determined everyday life (of the non-philosopher), by linking the former to a special kind of mental activity that is not, perhaps, always available to everyone, but seems in fact to be the distinct virtuosic specialization of a self-cultivating ethical elite.

Arendt, in Denny's evocative summary, instead links action to common aspects of the human condition, indeed in two distinct ways. First, action, as it discloses or forms the character of the actor, is linked primarily not to the latter's own self-conception (which philosophy and religion might challenge him to suspend, break with, revise etc., in light of some shattering revelation or new relation to death, the will, etc.) but to "judgment in the world of opinion" (Denny 1979, p. 247). What's important about action, in other words, is what other people (besides the actor) say about it—the way that it reveals who the actor is to an evaluative audience expressing their interpretations of who the action reveals the actor to be. The actor's eventual insight into himself, if any, is won through his immersion in the world, wherein his actions are performed and judged. The tragedy, after all, has a chorus.

The "world of opinion" is possible in the first place because of what Denny calls the "elemental condition" of human "plurality," a condition he links to natality and mortality. Natality is a central concept of Arendt's *The Human Condition*, but one that is unfortunately most directly elaborated in a concluding passage that figures it as the "miracle that saves the world" in somewhat purple religious language that may distract attention from its crucial ordinariness (Arendt 1958, p. 247). Natality refers to two facts. First, each new person born is distinct from all other people, and will come to have his own perspective and identity. Second, each of us is capable, out of our particularity, of starting some undertaking that may continue beyond our intentions, both as a physical "process" and as something evaluated, imagined and remembered by other human beings. We are *born* each of us as unique individuals, and capable of *giving birth* to actions, or what Arendt also calls "deeds," that are, like the consequences of our own births, irreversible and unpredictable over the length of their "process" (Arendt 1958, p. 233).

Mortality, in contrast to natality, is less central to *The Human Condition*, and Denny might be said to be somewhat peculiar in highlighting it. But it is naturally connected to the other two elements of our human condition that he takes to be crucial to Arendt's account: natality and plurality. Our being each of us finite, limited in capacity and duration, appears to be linked to our ability to be different from each other and ourselves. Our being mortal has to do with our not being all the same, since an immortal being might, or might aspire to, develop over his endless life a comprehensive perspective on the whole, englobing all others, and to take on in his infinite existence all forms of activity and thus all possible identities. This will never happen for us. We cannot live long enough to realize the whole of human potential (to the extent that such an abstraction is, in the first place, even imaginable as a goal), and thus can neither reconcile our individual life to all other possible human lives nor run out of unrealized possibilities for our own. Because we are mortal, we can overcome neither *plurality* nor *natality*—although indeed the temptation to overcome them does seem to reappear continually in the history of thought and modern politics through fantasies about the self-realization of a collective subject (Humanity, Absolute Knowledge, Species-Being, etc.). And it may be that a totalitarian project might succeed in abolishing or utterly obscuring the "elemental conditions" of action and judgment, such that human life would lose its freedom, spontaneity, and authenticity.

If the world of opinion is threatened by such dangers, it is also open to modification by new actions. One of the most significant of these, for Denny, was Gracian's first use of the concept of taste in the extensive sense of aesthetic, ethical, etc., evaluation. "This new word," *taste*, Denny argues "and the attitude towards the world [that] it embodied constituted a sort of 'tradition' that runs through the heart of the

Enlightenment, although perhaps tradition is too strong a word, suggesting a greater coherence and linear progression than is appropriate here” (Denneny 1973a, p. 1).

Denneny’s claims here are as noteworthy as his grounds for hesitation. He posits that by putting the concept of taste into circulation, Gracian had inaugurated a complex, multi-sided historical process that would go on to outlast his own life and to involve many other people. Gracian, in the terms of Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, can thus be said to have *acted*. Denneny’s own dissertation offers a judgment on the meaning of Gracian’s intellectual action, and the character or identity that this meaning reveals Gracian to have made, without full knowledge of the consequences, for himself. Significantly, Denneny departs from Arendt’s line of thought by suggesting that our natality—our capacity for action, that is, for new beginnings—is a source of “tradition,” insofar as traditions can be understood precisely as processes that enroll multiple people across time in projects to which they contribute without having total awareness of their points of origin or ultimate outcome. If this is what tradition means, then we are always-already within a tradition—just as we are also, through our natality, capable of starting new ones. This would require us, as Denneny seems anxious to avoid saying in “too strong” terms, to reconceive of tradition in more capacious terms than Arendt did, and to acknowledge the Enlightenment as a particular kind of tradition. The history of the eighteenth century, and even of the twentieth, would appear not as ruptures suspending “tradition” in the singular, but rather as the continual inheritance and creation of traditions in the plural.

IMAGINATION AND COMMON SENSE

Something like this, Denneny suggests, is adumbrated in Arendt’s interpretation of Kant. What most appealed to her about the *Critique of Judgment*, he argues, was Kant’s attention to the sociability displayed in judging. Not only do we want to express our judgments of taste to other people, Kant noted, but even in the very moment of our forming a judgment, we make use of what he called a *sensus communis*, distinct from ordinary meanings of “common sense.” The *sensus communis* rather has to do with our sense of how other people would interpret our experience of the object evaluated; it is a way of making present in the imagination virtual interlocutors, or a way of representing to ourselves the interpretive context in which our experience takes place. How the imagination carries out this work remains vague in both Arendt and Kant’s writings. The latter pale in comparison, for example, with Adam Smith’s vivid descriptions by which he seeks to show that practices of imagining other people’s possible responses are folded into our most essential experiences of approbation and disapprobation, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Arendt’s lecture on the role of the imagination in Kant in her posthumous *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* is at best a vague beginning.

Denneny did not attempt to elucidate the role of imagination in evaluation, but his essay makes the provocative suggestion that such an elucidation might pass not through Kant but rather through Shaftesbury, “whose thought has startling and profound affinities with that of Arendt,” and who was the subject of his third and last dissertation chapter. While awarding Kant the dubious prize for the “clearest exposition” of the concepts involved in judgment, Denneny asserts that it is Shaftesbury who is “a richer and more profound thinker on this subject.” Indeed, given that for Denneny taste, judgment, and all the forms of evaluation having to do with our life as aesthetic, ethical and political beings were not capable of conceptual clarification in the sense habitual for what he dismisses in his essay as “professional philosophy,” to be a profound thinker on the subject necessarily means forgoing conceptual clarity as the goal of thought (Denneny 1979, p. 262).

Shaftesbury, as Denneny presents him, is a complex “literary” stylist more akin to an idiosyncratic modern “critic” or essayist than the sort of “professional philosopher” who clarifies concepts. In Denneny’s reading, Shaftesbury sought to “beguile” readers and awaken thinking rather than to impart a coherent doctrine (Denneny 1973b, p. 15). He highlights a few aspects of Shaftesbury’s thought and combines them in what might seem to be a questionable way, which he does not seek to justify through comparison with other interpretations of the English thinker’s writings. Denneny discusses at some length Shaftesbury’s

notion of taste, arguing that it builds on the way in which Gracian, Bouhours, and other early modern thinkers linked aesthetic, ethical and political evaluations by attending to their common dependence on examples rather than rules. Just as with Bouhours' *je ne sais quoi*, Denneny suggests that Shaftesbury's most significant work on taste lies not in explaining its example-dependent character, however, but in his actual furnishing of examples for the exercise of taste. The fragmentary, allusive and dialogical or aphoristic nature of many of his writings, by this interpretation, would be—like Bouhours' dialogues—a way to form the taste of readers without attempting to supply a clear concept of its non-conceptuality.

The most important of these writings for Denneny's purposes is a text on "soliloquy," in which Shaftesbury advocated that readers cultivate psychological equilibrium through a practice of imaginatively creating different characters for emotions and thoughts that they might otherwise struggle to control (Denneny 1973b, p. 14). By acting as these characters, giving voice to their 'perspectives,' and then responding to them, individuals gain, Shaftesbury argued, a greater degree of self-mastery than they would obtain through simple repression. Notably, Shaftesbury associated the latter approach with Stoic and traditional Christian moral teaching about *conscience*, while he presented his own notion of "soliloquy" as an introjection, within the individual, psychological, and imaginal spheres, of the kind of worldly conversation among distinct individuals, each with different perspectives that must be acknowledged and respected, characteristic of the polite society of the European elite. It was, in other words, a way to use one's imagination to create an internal, psychic *plurality* akin to the plurality that is an "elemental condition" of judgment.

Soliloquy, Denneny argues, must be seen not only as a mode of ethical self-regulation through imaginative play with personae, but as an exemplary means to "form our taste." Instead of acting immediately on the basis of what appears to him, the soliloquist learns to create within himself other possible perspectives on that appearance, to relativize them, consider them in turn, and thus to "judge" even in the absence of real interlocutors. In the same way, when such a person comes to consider aesthetic, ethical or political questions, he can imagine himself, through the techniques he has learned, in a virtual dialogue with possible future interlocutors who will judge his actions and evaluations. The same techniques of imagination that can regulate our own private conduct also teach us how to make use of what Kant would call the *sensus communis*, and thus to be members of communities in which judgments are exchanged.

Denneny notes that Shaftesbury calls the power that soliloquists gain relative to appearances and the personae by which he considers them "the privilege of ourselves." Privilege—or *private law* in its Latin etymology—is a unique, dispensation granted to an individual. As a goal it thus differs from Kant's conception of *autonomy* (giving oneself the law) as ethics might be said to differ from morality, or the specific from the generic. Denneny's displacement of *autonomy* in favor of the *privilege of ourselves* could be compared to Arendt's critique of the goal of moral and political *sovereignty* in *The Human Condition* and *Willing*. Explicating this point further, however, is beyond our possibilities here—except to note that by giving his essay on Arendt the title "The Privilege of Ourselves," Denneny meant to connect Shaftesbury's ideas about taste and soliloquy to Arendt's thinking about judgment, and to direct readers of Arendt away from the *Critique of Pure Reason* back to Shaftesbury's essays (and his own dissertation).

Working against Kantian notions of *faculty*, the *thing in itself*, and *sensus communis*, Denneny tried to bring attention to the social, historical, and imaginative dimensions of the evaluative activity that unites aesthetic, ethical and political thinking across the boundaries between 'private' and 'public' life. It is in that sense no accident that rather than finish his dissertation by writing on Kant and judgment, he entered the world of "opinion," publishing books meant to bring new perspectives to a particular community of interlocutors and in doing so to exemplify, in his own way, how one might acquire—if never quite conceptualize—taste.

The acquisition of taste through soliloquy, the ability to populate an inner world with distinct perspectives that one must take into account, is, Denneny suggests, much more than a way for Enlightenment aristocrats to divert themselves or refine their aesthetic and ethical discriminations. It answers the call set by Arendt's anguished considerations on the Eichmann trial. If neither norms nor conscience (both so cru-

cial to traditional visions of liberal politics and morality) suffice to protect us from committing evil, and if we need in order to resist the latter to sharpen our ability to judge, then we need to turn, Denneny implies, not to a philosophical tradition aiming at more precise definitions and sub-categories of judgment, but to a secularized spiritual tradition of imaginative ascetic practices by which we might, in making ourselves accustomed to an inner polyvocality, equip ourselves with a multi-sided perspective on both social norms and our own internalization of them. Against the banality of evil, we might seek, through the play of taste, the privilege of ourselves.

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NOTES

- 1 Arendt tended to speak of *judgment* rather than *taste*, but her 1959 essay "Kultur and Politik" Arendt 2007 and 1960/1961, route the thinking usually associated with the former through the latter, allowing Arendt to emphasize (to a greater degree than either *The Human Condition* before them or *Thinking, Willing*, and the lectures on Kant after them) how the expression of taste discloses the person expresses it to have a particular character, and serves as the basis of friendship. That evaluation has to do not only with our being part of a community, but our being part of specific, even minoritarian networks of mutual pleasure within a larger community, is not otherwise emphasized in her thinking on judgment/taste, and is beyond the scope of this essay to consider—but it was an important element of the eventual reinterpretation and putting into practice of Arendt's political-aesthetic thinking by her student Michael Denneny.
- 2 Gadamer shared with Denneny the intuition that a rewriting of the history of philosophy in the Enlightenment in light of this revised concept of tradition would entail a shift away from, or even a turn against, Kant's aesthetics, and a consequent reappraisal of Shaftesbury's notion of taste.
- 3 It should be noted in passing that this strong sense of a universal *should* accompanying aesthetic judgments is notably absent in Arendt's 1959-1960 account of *taste*, which at times indeed approaches something of the spirit of what Sontag, later in the 60s, would identify as the self-consciously minoritarian and anti-universalist quality of certain aesthetic evaluations, such as those at play in *camp*. The disappearance of this thematic from Arendt's later work seems connected to the disappearance of the thematic of aesthetic evaluation as a means of bringing about *friendship*, which of course always operates at a scale much smaller than that of the universal injunctions addressed to everyone and no one in particular that Kant—in a perhaps peculiarly professorial mode—took to be characteristic of aesthetic life.
- 4 It appears, for example, in Arendt 1978, p. 216.
- 5 On their relationship, and Rosenberg's career more generally, Balken 2021.