

# The Impossibility of Consensus Building in Arendt's Theory of Judgment

Yuka KURASHINA

## Abstract:

Hannah Arendt's unfinished exploration of judgment, particularly in light of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, offers a nuanced perspective on judgment that questions the feasibility of consensus building. While previous scholarship has often interpreted Arendt's reflective judgment as a tool for promoting consensus in a pluralistic community, this study argues that Arendt's later work demonstrates the impossibility of this goal. Through an analysis of her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, this study explores the political implications of judgment as a communicable yet inherently subjective faculty. Central to this investigation is Arendt's reinterpretation of Kant's aesthetic judgment and its application to political contexts. The distinction between actor and observer and the reflective aspects of judgment, namely, the aesthetic and emotional, underscores a skepticism of consensus that complicates the traditional understanding of Arendt's political theory. Ultimately, this study suggests that Arendt's theory of judgment does not seek to unify differences but rather embraces plurality of opinion as a vital feature of political life. This understanding of judgment has significant implications for contemporary discussions of political discourse and the limits of consensus in communities.

**Keywords:** judgment, consensus building, Hannah Arendt, Immanuel Kant.

## Introduction

Hannah Arendt's theory of judgment is known as her unfinished last work. Arendt conceived her late major work, *The Life of the Mind*, as a trilogy of "Thinking", "Willing", and "Judging." However, Arendt died on December 4, 1975, leaving only the table of contents and two epigraphs<sup>1</sup> of "Judging." To gain insights into Arendt's intended focus for "Judging," it is necessary to compile fragmentary discussions of the theme of judgment as found in her 1961 article "Truth and Politics" and her 1970 lecture transcript, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.<sup>2</sup>

This study shows that judgment implies the impossibility of consensus. This is because several previous studies have emphasized building judgment through consensus. In this study, the following procedure was used to analyze in accordance with the *Kant Lectures*, which was given first at the New School for Social Research during the fall semester of 1970. First, we present a formal specification of Arendt's theory of judgment with reference to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Second, we will analyze previous studies and point out cases where the "faculty of judgment," as Arendt presents it, does not lead to consensus. To the best of our knowledge, such elements in Arendt's theory of judgment have not been addressed in previous studies. If the points made here are legitimate, we can discuss Arendt's unfinished work by placing it in an empirical context. The empirical matter, in this case, is civic education (political education). This preliminary study explored the possibility of rethinking civic education based on judgment.

## Section 1: The Political Implications of Aesthetic Judgment

Judgment is the mental faculty that causes the actualization of politics. Arendt's theory of judgment, which holds that the public realm is formed by exercising judgment, is the linchpin of Arendt's philosophy. Per a previous study by Ronald Beiner and others, the *Kant Lectures* is based on the "reflective judgment" (aesthetic judgment) and is concerned with political and historical judgment. According to the format presented in the previous study, both are judgments made by exercising "reflective judgment."<sup>3</sup> Reflective judgment is the ability to find the universal in the particular. The ability to judge the aesthetic value of something by perceiving it as beautiful is also said to be an emotional judgment.

This section will focus on "aesthetic judgment" and define the concept's form. In Section 2 of the *Kant Lectures*, Arendt explains some kinds of judgments to her students indicated in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Cf. LKPP 10-16). Therefore, we must be sure about Kant's theory of judgment to move this study forward. As Kant says, "aesthetic judgment" relates to situations involving human feelings and emotions. This view presupposes a case in which some kind of representation is related to the "feelings of pleasure and displeasure ("Gefühl der Lust oder Unlust," Ak. V 203/89)" of the subject and basically to the subject's vital force. In this case, subjectivity is inspired by some kind of representation, "feels itself," and is affected by its feelings (*Ibid.*, 204/89). This representation is related to the "feeling of life (Lebensgefühl)" of the subject or its "feelings of pleasure and displeasure" through "imagination" (in a free play with understanding). Because they are not necessarily based on logic, aesthetic judgments are influenced more by personal feelings than objective facts. This study focuses on one occasion of beauty: disinterested delight (Cf. "the pure disinterested satisfaction," *Ibid.*, 205/91),<sup>4</sup> which realizes "universal validity" in the sense of sharing an atmosphere or feeling with others. Returning to Arendt's argument, disinterested delight is a satisfaction perceived when only the faculty of judgment, without the capacity of desire, is at work (LKPP 29-30). In this case, mere observation or "contemplation" of the beautiful object exists, such as intuition or reflection. Therefore, pleasure in the beautiful is not based on the senses, as in the "agreeable." Nor is it based on concepts, as in the case of the "good," nor does it aim at them. In enjoying the beautiful, desire is not active; only the faculty of judgment is active.

Since it cannot desire and direct interest in the object described above, aesthetic pleasure applies to everyone beyond individual differences. However, the approval of others, which is required when one finds something beautiful, is merely subjective and "communicable" without the concept of an object. In other words, though subjective, the feeling of "beauty" can be shared with others nonverbally.

Arendt's distinctive interpretation of Kant's "universal validity" as "general validity" serves as the foundation for her concept of "communicability." To understand what Arendt means by this "general validity," examine the following quotation: "Truth in the science is dependent on the experiment that can be repeated by others; it requires general validity" (*Ibid.*, 40). The emphasis is on the practical point that, unlike philosophical knowledge, scientific knowledge can be reproduced by anyone, anywhere, and at any time. Thus, Arendt replaces Kant's transcendental argument with an earthly one. The judgment of beauty presupposes a community that guarantees the generality of each judgment. In other words, although we judge within our minds, the conditions for actualizing judgment have a public aspect that can be shared with others. It cannot be undone once an action is taken or a word is spoken. We can understand this situation in relation to the political issues in newspapers, TV shows, and social media posts daily. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt emphasized the difficulties of the unpredictability and

irreversibility that accompany such activities (HC 237). According to the *Lectures*, the chaos created by human actions is not resolved transcendently but through empirical order. This order is established by the "communicability" of words and actions, created by the extremely primitive sympathy (Cf. "sympathetic participation", LKPP 46) of people not concerned with their self-interest or party politics.

This section can be summarized as follows: Arendt's theory of judgment, central to her philosophy, is deeply rooted in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, particularly the concept of "disinterested delight." She interprets Kant's reflective judgment as a process involving interpersonal relationships and bridges the realms of contemplation and praxis, enabling judgment to seek the universal within the particular, as exemplified in political and historical judgment. However, Arendt's political philosophy is reluctant to fully embrace reflective judgment as a practical faculty, often positioning it as primarily contemplative. This tension stems from her interpretation of the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment as possessing both public and practical dimensions, while "disinterested delight" itself entails pure contemplation. This contradiction complicates her theory of judgment, especially when Kant's notions of disinterestedness, which Arendt identifies as forms of politics, challenge traditional philosophical paradigms. Arendt reinterprets Kant's idea of "universal validity" as "general validity," emphasizing the communicability of aesthetic judgments. While subjective, aesthetic judgments can be shared and universally applied across individual differences. She contrasts Kant's transcendental argument with a practical one, asserting that judgment presupposes a public realm that ensures the generality of individual judgment. In other words, the scope of a judgment's validity is circumscribed by the communal framework of shared objects. Arendt further asserted that the unpredictability and irreversibility of political action are inherently tied to the communicability of both words and deeds. She argues that the inherent disorder of human affairs can be tempered through shared, impartial sympathy among individuals, which forms the foundation of political life.

## Section 2: The Agent of Judgment: Actor-Observer Relationship

How is the disinterested interest in appreciating beauty incorporated into Arendt's framework of life of action (*vita activa*)? This section will look at the bearers of judgment because (as Arendt acknowledges) the discussion of the bearers solves the problem of praxis and contemplation presented in the first section. To summarize the form, "political judgment" is exercised by the "actor." By contrast, "historical judgment" is exercised by "observers." Although we speak of "judgment," we use multiple forms of judgment depending on the context in which we find ourselves. This study analyzes the relationship between the bearers of both types of judgment, focusing on the "aesthetic judgment" shared by the "actor" and the "observer."

The individual must transform from an "actor" into an "observer" within their mind, contemplating the significance of their actions and words while maintaining a grasp of the dynamic situation. The "actor" is a political subject who thinks for themselves and establishes relationships with others through words and actions. According to Arendt, the "actor" is, by definition, partial because the "actor" (part of the play) must engage in their part (*Ibid.*, 55). Simultaneously, the actor is always concerned with the opinions (*doxa*) of others toward them. In other words, they are full of the desire for fame. The actor's judgment depends on the observer's opinion, who is not involved in the act or the event caused by the act. Therefore, the "actor" is required not only to look at the beautiful things in front of them but also to have a kind of objective judgment that constantly questions the meaning of one's

actions. In her *Kant Lectures*, Arendt writes that reflective judgment lacks the following actions:

Had he [Kant, who acts for peace in *Metaphysics of Morals*] forgotten, because of this “moral duty,” his insights as a spectator, he would have become what so many good men, involved and engaged in public affairs, tend to be an idealistic fool. (*Ibid.*, 54)

The above quotation may be interpreted as follows: an actor cannot ensure the reality of their speech and action without considering the meaning of the events in which they participate. Otherwise, the “actor” forgets themselves, becomes narrow-minded, and thus becomes an “idealistic fool.” It is easy for us to picture this situation in our minds. Therefore, an activity qualifies as political, distinct from riots or wars, when it appears to observers that the actors are not merely performing for others with the motivation of gaining fame or fortune. The “actor” must become an “observer” in one’s mind, reflecting on the meaning of their actions and words and holding the reins.

Without “aesthetic judgment,” the “historical judgment” of the “observer” cannot function. An “observer” is a person who observes the words and actions of “actors” without participating in their politics. The “observer” is, by definition, impartial because they watch the whole play from the audience’s seat (*Ibid.*, 55). The observer’s existential horizon is disinterested; there is no desire for glory, and the observer is not involved in an action or event. The distance from the events widened the horizon. What triggers the “observer” to begin judging is the experience of being moved by the “actor” involved in the event before them. For example, Arendt points to a two-step judgment in the observer by presenting the “example of the china shop” (*Ibid.*, 53). A passerby (the observer) sees two drunks in a fistfight in a pottery shop and remarks, “The two drunks don’t care about the shop” (i.e., the world). The observer sees the scene of the two drunks hitting each other at will, ignoring that they are surrounded by less durable objects that could fall off the shelves and break at the slightest vibration. The observer stops at the fight between the two drunks only because the courage of the two fighting inspires them, and he is emotionally moved by the scene (feeling “sublime”). In this way, the “observer” must also have “aesthetic judgment.” In this formulation, we can point out the superiority of the “observer” over the “actor” and the role of “aesthetic judgment,” which is common to both. With this generality of judgment as a hinge, the “observer” and “actor” are bound together. Thus, for Arendt, the faculty of judgment inherent to human minds in general and the space of intersubjectivity that it forms are given the role of creating relationships between people in the public realm (*Ibid.*, 63). The “reflective judgment” is not only a faculty on the horizon of “action.” It plays a role in forming the basis for actualizing the “act” itself. Regarding the “public realm,” practical life (*vita activa*) and contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) are related. This was the main point of this study.

This section can be summarized as follows. Actors: While participating in activities, there is a constant demand to withdraw from one’s mind and try to grasp the meaning of the events. Observers: While not participating in activities, there is a latent demand to participate in politics through the “act” of observation = “sympathy.” In this way, Arendt’s theory of judgment presents a parallel aspect between the types and bearers of judgment. One does not completely withdraw from the scene, although one observes events in a community from a general standpoint but remains within the community. Therefore, there remains room for the “observer” to become actively involved in the practice again. The way we judge does not fall into simple dualism, and it is no exaggeration to say that it considers the plurality of human life. The different ways of making judgments and the movements between them explain the

complementarity and continuity of the actions of people living together. The basis of action, generally shared by people who move between partiality and impartiality, validates their actions.<sup>5</sup>

### Section 3: The Negative Aspects of Judgment

Based on the above textual reading, we now examine current research on Arendt's theory of judgment. Having established the concept of aesthetic judgment, the next step was to explore its public significance. The question focused on here is, "Can Arendt's theory of judgment reach a consensus?" Previous studies have attempted to integrate Arendt's discussion of judgment throughout her life into a single system to reconstruct her posthumous work. According to E. Makino (2003), "Arendt explored a way to achieve consensus among a larger number of people by allowing each person's different opinions, each independent individual, to freely assert their own opinions under their own responsibility and to exercise their political judgment while standing in the shoes of others."<sup>6</sup> Makino notes that Arendt here calls for the formation of more valid opinions mediated by communication with others. Thus, in previous studies, "reflective judgment," which assumes a difference (*dokei moi*) between people's words and actions toward the same object and sees the generality exercised in them, has been interpreted as aiming at consensus building without suppressing the plurality of opinions.

Was Arendt aiming for consensus in her *Kant Lectures*? Indeed, "consensus" appears in "Truth and Politics" (1961). "Consensus building" refers to the "enlarged mentality" (to put it plainly and without fear of misunderstanding: taking the positions of several others, as far as each person can take them) that is common to the horizon of communication and is necessary for judging. The degree of finality that "potential consensus" seeks has been discussed variously, but Makino and J. Habermas (1977) see it as the opinion (*doxa*) that leads to decision-making. Regarding consensus, it should be noted that the word "consensus" does not appear even once in the *Lectures*. Rather, in the *Lectures*, historical judgment about "understanding the world," which goes to the question of how each person takes in unprecedented events and finds meaning therein, is one of the subjects that replaces consensus building. Applying the concept of "consensus" to Arendt's late theory would not be an honest reading of the text.

Even if we accept Arendt's late theory of judgment as consensus-building, it is difficult to take it literally. This is because the "aesthetic judgment" discussed in this study seems like a double-edged sword. Tension can arise between the actor and the observer, as the observer's aesthetic preferences may not always align with the actor's words or deeds. Moreover, a lack of reflection ("thoughtlessness" LMT 4) may make observers mistakenly perceive certain actions as aesthetically pleasing. As explored in Section 2, this can result in a perceived "consensus" that masks an underlying disharmony (the loss of continuity and complementarity) between the actor and the observer. Regarding the negative aspects of judgment, we can assume three cases: (1) when an action does not suit the "observer's" taste, (2) when the emotion evoked by the performance is genuine, or (3) when it is sublime. This study will examine (1) and (2).<sup>7</sup>

#### 1) When the action is not in the "observer's" interest

We can imagine a case in which the "actor" and "observer" presented by Arendt are in disharmony. Arendt conceives her theory of judgment by comparing the subject who exercises "genius" and "taste" in Kant's theory of art in the *Critique of Judgment* with her concepts of "actor" and "observer" (LKPP 62). According to Kant, genius is "the exemplary originality of the natural endowment of a subject for the

free use of his cognitive faculties (Ak. V 318/195).” Originality is a gift that provides new rules to things. Genius cannot explain how a work of art is created. Kant argues that we must consider that “nature, through genius, gives rules for art.” However, “something academically correct” that follows the rules mechanically is essential in art (*Ibid.*, 310/188). In the case of a genius, the “animating principle in the mind,” the “spirit or genius” (*esprit*), is active. In a genius, the unrestrained expression of conceptualization abounds with stimulating ideas, not enough specific thoughts, concepts, and words, and the expression of the genius transcends the limits of language and concepts. Arendt inherits the “genius” and the originality of genius as presented by Kant. This argument is supported by Arendt’s quote: Taste (like aesthetic judgment in general) “clips the wings” of genius, “gives guidance,” and “brings clearness and order” to the act of genius (LKPP 62). Thus, the taste is superior to the genius.

On the contrary, Arendt’s unique parallel view is that she does not limit “genius” to artists but also recognizes the originality of “actors” who bring to the community new doers and words that have previously never existed (*Ibid.*, 63).<sup>8</sup> While an unprecedented new event such as the French Revolution can function as a metabolism that keeps the community alive, it can also be associated with tyranny and oppression by rulers. The will of genius forces the suppression of differences with others, and the plurality of others, a condition for the functioning of judgment, is deprived. This is evident in history, beginning with M. Robespierre in the French Revolution. The “originality of the actor” is a gift of genius recognized through training and the observer’s approval.

## 2) Are the emotions evoked by the performance real?

The question at issue has long been debated in the history of philosophy: “Are the emotions evoked by acting itself real?” This study argues that Arendt explains the concept of “judgment” through the composition of the audience (“observers”) who watch the theater woven by the “actors.” By exercising reflective judgment, it might appear that the plurality of people has reached a consensus. However, one might also consider the possibility that plurality has been formalized. For instance, this is an election year in many parts of the world. In Japan, the media sensationalizes “politics” through the lens of election campaigns, offering entertaining reports on candidates who hurl insults at one another or turn the process into gossip. Whether intentionally or not, these fragmented, staged images are broadcast and often distort public judgment. Consequently, many people probably vote based on their feelings (“aesthetic judgment”), such as “somehow” not liking something or having high expectations.<sup>9</sup>

This problem seems fatal to Arendt’s philosophy. In her early work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt regards Nazism and Stalinism as a kind of art (“fictitious world,” OR 335). The eugenic ideology, for example, as seen in Nazi propaganda posters, was a device to lure people into a fictitious world by expressing fiction as if they were facts and by exploiting the thinking activities of people who seek only logical consistency, even though they have a scientific basis. One cannot entirely discount the possibility that certain people might perceive the narratives produced by the Nazi regime as aesthetically appealing. Here, we must admit that not only the “actors” but also the “observers” contain the element of falling into the “idealistic fool.”

## Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to analyze Hannah Arendt’s late theory of judgment and its implications for consensus building. My analysis revealed that Arendt’s concept of judgment extends



beyond mere opinion formation to encompass how individuals perceive and engage with the world. Importantly, judgment as a collective and political act has the potential for practical influence, even when it begins as a contemplative exercise within a community.

Contrary to the assumption that Arendt's contemplative stance requires complete disengagement from political practice, we argue that those seemingly removed from direct political participation can still profoundly shape public discourse through their reflective perspectives. This paradox suggests that politically disengaged individuals may wield considerable power in shaping collective judgments.

Moreover, we challenge the view that Arendt's thoughts primarily concern achieving consensus. Instead, her theory of reflective judgment, which allows for the exploration of an undefined universal without imposing closure, reveals deeper skepticism about the feasibility of the consensus itself. By examining her reflections on taste, genius, and the emotional dimensions of action, we highlight the impossibility of building consensus as an essential feature of her theory.

In conclusion, Arendt's theory of judgment offers insights not only into the potential for consensus but also into its inherent limitations. Rather than focusing solely on failures of communication or individual autonomy, her work underscores the inevitability of disagreement in certain contexts. This recognition opens new avenues for linking her theoretical framework to practical applications, particularly civic education. Future research will continue to explore the dynamic nature of judgment and how it informs political practice and education, focusing on its limitations and potential.

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#### Acknowledgment

This work was supported by JST, establishing university fellowships towards creating science technology innovation, Grant Number JPMJFS2102.

We would like to thank Editage ([www.editage.jp](http://www.editage.jp)) for English language editing.

This study is a revised version of the manuscript presented at the International Workshop: French and German Philosophy on September 9, 2024. We thank Professor Tatsuya Murayama (Tohoku University) for providing us with this opportunity.

<sup>1</sup> The one is from Cato (*Victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni*) and the other is from Goethe (*Könnst ich Magie von meinem Pfad entfernen, Die Zaubersprüche ganz und gar verlernen, Stünd' ich Natur vor Dir, ein Mann allein, Da wär's der Mühe wert ein Mensch zu sein*).

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Beiner's edition of *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* contains a Postscriptum added to the end of Part I, "Thinking," in *The Life of the Mind*. The relationship between "Lectures on Kant's Political philosophy" and Part III, "Judging" in *The Life of the Mind* needs to be re-examined.

<sup>3</sup> This position is supported by previous studies, such as Villa (2004) and Miyazaki (2019).

<sup>4</sup> In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant reads the grounds for "reflective judgment" on beauty through the following four occasions: (1) disinterested delight, (2) the free play between imagination and understanding, namely, the absence of determinate concepts, (3) the form of purposive without a purpose, and (4) the *sensus communis*, which posits a shared universal validity based on subjective conditions of necessity.

<sup>5</sup> In Arendt's later theory of judgment, the concept of "common sense" is used as the ability to judge right and wrong using a sense other than practical reason. This study will not discuss Arendt's theory of common sense. However, there is a view that agreement can be reached by using common sense as a guide. In response to this view, I would like to affirm Arendt's assertion that "common sense is based on a sense of taste" (LKPP 64).

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Junichi Saito (1987) asks, "How is it possible to overcome this chaotic state of affairs without suppressing the diversity of opinions?"

<sup>7</sup> This study does not address the theory of the sublime, as the issue it concerns lies on a different dimension. Arendt identifies war as the ultimate limit of worldly things, providing a compelling example of the sublime (Cf. LKPP 52-53).

<sup>8</sup> "The public realm is constituted by the critics and spectator, not by the actors or the makers. Additionally, this critical judging faculty, the doer or maker, would be so isolated from the spectator that he would not even be perceived. Otherwise, to put it in another way, in Kantian terms: the very originality of the artist (or the very novelty of the actor)

depends on his making himself understood by those who are not artists (or actors).”

<sup>9</sup> In line with the discussion thus far, we can expect the complementarity of judgment to be at work in the aestheticization of politics. It is not possible to describe “historical judgment” in detail here, but if I were to summarize it in a few words, it is a kind of prescriptive judgment that attempts to understand the meaning of events unfolding before our eyes in the present in light of judgments of meaning (“Exemplars”) about historical events in the past. Here, Arendt faces a conceptual problem in her judgment of beauty. What constitutes the shift between “aesthetic judgment” and “historical judgment,” as well as the mechanism and motive for verbalizing the content of the judgment, remain to be explored in the future.

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