Politics – The Highest Form of Philosophy?

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Beauty and the *Bios Politikos*

Hannah Arendt is often represented as a philosopher who turned her back on philosophy to embrace political thought. This may be in part because of her pronounced view that political action is the highest achievement to which humanity can aspire. As Margaret Betz Hull has restated this, Arendt maintains that it is “through political action that we develop who we are and acquire meaning and purpose to our lives” (7), but since the time of Plato, philosophy has been hostile to the affairs of men.¹ In spite of this, Arendt insists that political action is essential as well as unique to human life, that it is the highest form of philosophy, and that it differentiates human beings from all other species. It is these claims in particular that we are interested in investigating here. Is political action uniquely human or can other species be said to engage in political action? And if it is uniquely human, then what makes it so? What are the characteristics of political acts that would make them the highest form of philosophy? These questions will take us to a brief study of non-human animal intelligence in order to determine if it is similar to the ability of human beings to make political judgments based on factual truths.

According to Arendt, action is “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, [it] corresponds to the human condition of plurality ... [T]his plurality is specifically the condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life” (*Human* 7). The human condition of plurality refers, for

Arendt, to the idea that what human beings share is precisely what they do not share, that is, that they are each unique, that none of them is the same as anyone else who has ever lived (*Human* 8). How are we to understand this claim that action, the activity that goes on directly between men, corresponds to political life? What makes plurality both the necessary condition and the means for the realization of political life?

Arendt uses the term “*vita activa*” to designate fundamental human activities, including labour, work or fabrication, and action in the more restricted sense, each of which is conditioned by the fact that human beings live together. But of these components of the *vita activa*, action alone is the *exclusive* prerogative of human beings, where action correlates with political life, which is “entirely dependent on the constant presence of others” (*Human* 22-23). So far, nothing in this seems restricted to the human species, but to make sense of the distinctions we are examining, let us first clarify the difference between the “political” realm and, shall we say with some trepidation, the *merely* “social,” or less derogatorily, the more generally social. To accomplish this, Arendt traces the origin and use of these terms in Western philosophy beginning with the ancient Greeks.

The term, *vita activa* is the Latin translation of Aristotle’s term, *bios politikos*, associated with autonomous and authentic ways of life (Arendt, *Human* 12-13).² As the translation of *bios politikos*, *vita activa* referred only to a life devoted to public and political matters and not to labour and work. Although already waning in Plato’s dialogues by the time of Augustine, the term *vita activa* lost its philosophical and political meaning of free action, action untainted by securing the necessities of life in the realm of human affairs. Even the public and political aspect of the *vita activa* was reduced to being merely another aspect of necessity, an un-quiet activity, leaving contemplation (*bios theōrētikos*) as the only remaining free although quiet way of life

(14). The elevation of contemplation to the highest human activity reduced public life, the life of the *polis*, to the realm of necessity. But contemplation is not political and does not involve public action.

Aristotle's *bios politikos*, the life that is freely chosen, one that is independent of necessity, including the necessity of labour, is also concerned with the beautiful. This association with beauty is surprising, if not shocking, and for Arendt, it will resonate with Immanuel Kant's conception of *disinterested pleasure* arising only in relation to beauty. Ways of life (*bioi*) chosen in freedom were concerned with the beautiful, with beautiful things that are neither necessary nor useful. These include the life of bodily pleasures, the life devoted to the excellence of beautiful deeds in and for the *polis*, as well as the life of the philosopher, the contemplation of beautiful, eternal things (Arendt, *Human* 12-13).³ The *bios politikos* is beautiful because it is for the sake of the *polis*, which itself is a *freely chosen* form of political organization. Thus, it is not for the sake of survival, neither the individual's nor that of the species. The criterion of beauty thus excludes the life of the despot, which we might identify as the rule of any sort of oppressive leader who subordinates other members of the group under his authority, and which therefore does not qualify as a *bios politikos*. It is not a life concerned with excellence and beauty but with usefulness or necessity (13).⁴

The beautiful *bios politikos* of the *vita activa* was established before Aristotle by the pre-Socratic Greeks with the recognition that although human beings do not choose to be born, they nevertheless produce their environments and care for them best when they organize the body politic, that is, when they act together: "Action ... is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others" (Arendt, *Human* 23). However, the Aristotelian concept of "man, the political animal"

(*zōon politikon*), was translated into Latin as “man, the social animal,” a word that in Latin soon lost any political connotation and became associated with the notion of the social as a fundamental human condition (23-24). For Arendt, this signifies a momentous change, a disparagement of the beautiful—meaning what is freely chosen and therefore unique to humanity—for the sake of the *merely* social, or that which humans and other animals have in common—something imposed on humans and non-humans by the needs of biological life, including the necessities of the home. Evidence for this is found throughout the classical Greek tragedies, where the conflict between family-based despotic power and newly forming political entities with democratic tendencies is rampant. We may want to claim that despotic authority is what allowed King Agamemnon to murder his own daughter in order to send his fleets to Troy. The ensuing struggles only ended with the establishment of a human jury, that is, with the invention of disinterested human judgments, which might, as we will see, be called “beautiful.”

For the pre-Socratic Greeks, the necessities of the home referred to what is owned (in other words, what we would call private property), as well as to what is kinship-related or related to a household economically organized by a male house-holder, a despot-like ruler. Nevertheless, Aristotle managed to maintain some sense of the *bios politikos* by holding that only action and speech (*praxis* and *lexis*) are compatible with the beauty of political communities because they exclude anything either necessary or useful for maintaining life (Arendt, *Human* 25). What mattered and what became the central concern of all citizens was what we now call the performative. Performative speech in this instance refers to finding “the right words at the right moment,” persuasive words which, in being said, would perform a noble action in and for the *polis* (26). In this view, the right words contrast with the muteness of despots who do not engage in persuasion and whose words often led to (and so was equated with) force and violence.

Ultimately, Arendt argues, it is the emergence of economic necessity from out of the private sphere into the public one that distinguishes the political from the social. As she notes, “The collective of families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-human family is what we call ‘society,’ and its political form of organization is called ‘nation’” (*Human* 29). Nevertheless, for the Greeks, whatever was economic or related to the economic belonged to the private household life of the individual, thus to necessity and species survival (29). Within the private sphere, the man was devoted to economic maintenance and the woman to species maintenance, both of which are spheres of necessity and labour, and of the preservation and continuation of life. The *polis*, on the other hand, developed as the only freely chosen sphere, a sphere of freedom, free of economics and free of species survival, although dependent on both for its existence (30). Only in the arena of the *polis*, in the community of citizens, among whom the noblest act was the act of persuasion, was the despot of the family released from his own despotism and equal to all other men who would speak there seeking to persuade.

But it seems that this way of life collapsed when the political realm was replaced by the social, when the private family became the model for the political state, when the political state was no longer constituted by a community of equals but was overrun by a multitude of private, economic persons with common economic interests, interests centered almost entirely on necessity and work (Arendt, *Human* 35). With the gradual rise of what came to be called the “common-wealth,” the despotic rule of each head of household was eventually transformed into the despotic rule of no one, that is, the *invisible hand* of the market place governed only by economics and statistics, valid only for large numbers or long-term frames wherein individual acts—performative acts and words of persuasion—are nothing but statistical deviations, easily obliterated by the surge toward statistical uniformity and predictability (42-43, 44). And that,

Arendt maintains, is the formation of society as the public realm. Everything private became public, and the behavioral sciences developed in order to study the public sphere. This sphere now included everything that was formerly strictly private, that is, the preservation of species (necessity) and the glorification of labour (for consumption), thereby putting an end to the *bios politikos*, to free political action as well as to beauty as a way of life.

Sensation, Perception and Appearance

We have examined how, from Arendt's point of view, action is the basis of political life. Yet, even though political human actions are direct human interactions, each human has a body and senses, a sensation of reality and a feeling of realness. Do we not share these characteristics with at least some animals? Therefore, do we have the right to claim that human interaction and consciousness of an acting self are uniquely, humanly political?

We began by noting that, for Arendt, activity that goes on directly between human beings without the intermediary of things or matter corresponds to the human condition of plurality. Elsewhere in her work she expands the concept of plurality by noting that every existing thing presupposes the plurality of sentient human beings to whom these things appear. However, sentient human beings are themselves appearances! This "worldliness" ensures that while humans see and touch, they are also seeable and touchable, which also ensures that every human subject is also an object appearing to someone else in the plurality of human beings. What guarantees objective reality is not what is in our heads, our consciousness of ourselves and of appearances in the world. Instead, as the Greek concept of the *bios politikos* implies, our appearance but also our speech and thoughts require other speakers and other listeners (Arendt,

Life 19).⁵ A thought that is not spoken or written never appears in the world at all and can therefore be neither affirmed nor denied. It is as good as non-existent.

Of course, it is not only for humans that Being and Appearing coincide, but also for other living species, all of which participate in the infinite diversity of the world of appearances, or what Arendt calls “the sheer entertainment value of its views, sounds, smells, something that is hardly ever mentioned by the thinkers and philosophers” (*Life* 20). These are the bodily pleasures that Aristotle counted as among those things that are beautiful (*kalon*) rather than necessary or useful. How can this be? Many external features of our fellow creatures are extremely pleasing to the eye (while our inner organs are not), and many species exhibit the urge to self-display, to groom their beautiful coats or to burst forth in beautiful song, just as we humans display our joy or anger in facial and bodily appearances and are driven by the urge to communicate our thoughts to others who we hope will listen to us, so as to give our words a significance they otherwise would simply lack (29, 30. 31).

Given the diversity of sense organs among animal species, there must be a corresponding diversity of world appearances. Therefore what appears to living creatures must also vary greatly, so as to ensure that every species lives in its own unique world in the midst of the world they share with other species. This is a world in which they appear, and, in time also disappear (*Life* 20). In other words, it does seem likely that the inner organs, the senses, and life processes exist for the sake of the community of appearances, and the community gives life processes meaning and significance (27). It also seems impossible to deny that there can be any reality without these appearances.

Yet once again, given that for each species our internal organs are all generally the same, that inside we humans are all alike, how can there be any significant distinction in what appears

to us? And since we humans are probably little different from numerous other species with respect to the feelings and sensations of our bodies, perhaps the apparent differences in what appears to us are simply deception. One significant difference between humans and some other species—but certainly not all—is the *cogito*, consciousness. Nevertheless, no consciousness of an acting self that had suspended faith in the reality of intentional objects would have been able to convince us of our own reality, had we been born without a body and senses, or without fellow creatures to confirm that they perceive the same thing (*Life* 48). Ultimately, Arendt maintains, our faith in the independent existence of objects depends on those objects appearing to others, and out of this we experience a *sensation* of reality, a feeling of realness that we must take care to differentiate from thought and from the *cogito*.

This might be the right place to cite several recent studies of non-human animal behavior, which have a bearing on our discussion here. Dolphins and dolphin behaviors have been studied extensively. Dolphins are apparently able to see both in and out of water. They hear, not through their tiny ears, but through mandibular bones that transfer sounds to the inner ear which has two to three times more cells than the human ear, suggesting hearing abilities far exceeding those of humans. Indeed, they seem to locate one another using both low-frequency and high-frequency sounds. In addition, mother dolphins put sponges on their own snouts and on those of their offspring to protect them while searching for food.⁶ Thus it appears that their senses do provide a sense of reality—at least of dolphin reality. Given the sponges protecting their snouts, they seem to engage in planning activities as well. Species other than dolphins also appear to be able to make plans. In a study conducted in Sweden, a dominant male chimp in the Furuvik Zoo was observed collecting and stacking caches of stones. The chimp later threw the stones at human

visitors who came to observe the animals interacting. This behavior was interpreted as a clear indication that chimps are capable of planning ahead and acting on their plans.⁷

Perhaps even more impressive are recent experiments showing that ravens use logic to solve problems and appear to possess abilities that surpass those of many great apes. Ravens were tested in a situation challenging them to reach some food suspended on a string and tied to a perch. At least some of the adult birds observed the situation for several minutes, then retrieved the food on their first try by grasping the string with their beak, stepping on the string to hold it in place, and repeating this until they reached the food. Ravens have been observed playing dead to keep other ravens away from food, and they have warned humans of impending danger from other animals lurking in the forest (Heinrich and Bugnyar 64). In other experiments, ravens that had observed specific birds watching where they hid their food chased those ravens away when they came near the stored food, but ignored other ravens that had not observed the hiding place (70). Since no “training” of any kind preceded these experiments, the researchers concluded that the birds “imagined possibilities and figured out what steps to take” (67). With respect to these behaviors, the general consensus has been that theoretical capabilities, that is, the ability to theorize, to plan and carry out plans, are well within the range of at least some non-human animal species.

Morality or Politics, But Not Both

Must we come then to the conclusion that other animal species, no less than the human, engage in politics? Are we kidding ourselves if we make a distinction between human and non-human animal species? Echoing Kant, Arendt notes that it is *not open to us* to ask the question: Why do men or why does any species exist? Every species is part of nature and subject to

nature's laws, but every species is also an end in itself (Arendt *Lectures*, 26-27; Kant *Critique* sect. 84: 435.25-35). Yet, in addition to nature's laws and the universal moral framework of ends, there is a third perspective to consider, one that may be unique to human life, one that resonates with the pre-Socratic Greek conception of the *polis*. This third perspective entails humanity freely choosing to live together in a community sense (*sensus communis*), needing one another in order to think, and thinking with the faculty of aesthetic judgment (Arendt, *Lectures* 27).

To consider this, it helps to distinguish several important points. First, not only philosophers, but all human beings as well as other species, are in possession of reason, understanding, and sensibility. Second, rational truth and truths are, as Arendt likewise insists, “within the reach of the great mass of men,” and probably beyond (Arendt *Lectures* 35; Kant *Critique* Bxxv). Many, if not most, humans—along with ravens, as we have seen—are capable of understanding something theoretically and then applying the rules they have understood to specific cases by means of a priori rational judgment (Arendt *Lectures* 35; Kant *Political Writings* 61). Moreover, since, for Kant, the law of non-contradiction (that is, the chief axiom of reason since Aristotle) ceased to be the path to knowledge and became instead the basis of *ethics* with the proposition “do not act so as to be at odds with yourself,” the great mass of humanity and other species certainly seem to be capable of putting this into practice (Arendt, *Lectures* 37). In other words, ethics is within the grasp of both human and non-human species.

We must, however, pay attention to the criticism that the universal moral law is quite possibly inappropriate as the basis of political action, even if it does, at least some of the time, suffice for ethical action. For example, we find Alphonso Lingis cautioning us on this matter. According to the Kantian model, which Lingis critiques, perception of the other as a rational

agent to whom we must apply the universal imperative of moral law is and must be distinguishable from the perception of others as psychophysical organisms (Lingis, *Foreign* 179). This is because the imperative commanding the mind to order sensory reality and to represent the exteriority as nature also commands the mind to promulgate universal and necessary laws throughout its own nature, thus subordinating its own sensory nature to the imperative for universal law that requires order (179). Yet, Lingis insists, sensory patterns, in the moment of their occurrence, cannot be conceptualized: “What is conceived is always the death of the animal” (179). In other words, to conceive of universal and necessary laws, the mind must detach from sensible things.

What happens if we were to maintain, as Lingis does, that language is “a second-order conventionalization of the expressive body” (*Foreign* 216)? As such a body, we would find ourselves immersed in an atmosphere, in sound, lights, warmth or cold, insofar as all life lives on sensation, on assimilating and being assimilated (Lingis, *Imperative* 15, 17). Thus the chimpanzee in the zoo, throwing rocks at the spectators, could be engaging in political action since, as Lingis maintains, neither language nor universals are needed for action; an expressive body will do. Yet we might want to be more cautious about this. Even if a chimpanzee throwing rocks were considered to be a political act, how could we explain the passage from elemental life, the life we share with all living things, to the acting in and among human pluralities that Arendt identifies with the political? Lingis maintains that in elemental life, hands that touch others “do not move with their own goals in view; they are moved, troubled by the touch of the other with which they make contact, afflicted with the pleasure and the torment of the other” (*Foreign* 170-171). The imperative is formulated in this manner because the hands now “make contact with a vulnerability that *summons them*, a susceptibility that *puts demands on them*”

(171, emphases added). So it is other sensible beings who encounter us and shape us. But, because this takes place prior to any sort of linguistic expression, in order for the sensible demands of others to actually serve as the basis of a political community, something must account for the process of reflection that allows us the freedom to choose rather than simply react to sensory stimuli—reactions that might be for better or for worse.

As Henri Bergson has described this, simple masses of protoplasm, living matter, are open to the influence of external stimulation and respond to it with mechanical, physical, and chemical reactions. Their perception is simultaneously passive and active. Organisms recognize prey and seize it at once, feel danger and flee at once (Bergson, *Matter* 32). But as organisms group themselves into systems and become more complex, it is possible to distinguish between automatism and voluntary activity. In higher vertebrates, the former is located in the spinal cord and the latter in the brain, but between them there is only a difference of degree insofar as the brain acts as a switching station exchanging one type of molecular movement for another (28-29). Still, the more developed the nervous system, the greater the scope of action. The brain receiving movement from the afferent nerves analyzes the molecular movements it receives, but movements are also *selected* in response (30-31). Perception appears precisely when the stimulation received is not immediately translated into a necessary action resembling mere contact. The longer the delay, the greater the zone of indetermination or freedom that accompanies any being's activity, and the more likely it is that memory will enter into the present perception opening the being's sphere of choice, and its possibilities for freedom (32-33).

If we accept the Bergsonian thesis that the body is a center of action, and if we agree that the size, shape, and color, as well as other sensory aspects of objects alter and are modified as our own bodies move toward or away from them, then it seems as though the objects

surrounding our own bodies do reflect its possible action on them (Bergson, *Matter* 20-21). It has been shown in recent neurophysiological studies that external objects disturb the afferent nerves, which then pass this movement on to networks of nerves that vary almost instantaneously with the nature and position of the objects (see Freeman). To the extent that this appears to be the case, our perception would indeed be a function of the molecular movements coming from external objects. Yet, we do not perceive everything. In fact, we focus on and so perceive only what interests us. This discernment, this choice, is ours to make (Bergson, *Matter* 40). Thus, the body influences external objects, giving movement back, yet *choosing* the manner in which it restores what it receives (19).

But additionally, when movements within the body but coming from external sources prepare the body to respond, we *feel our own body*: our body is the object being perceived; we know our own body from within by means of affective sensations (Bergson, *Matter* 57, 61). Pain is the clearest evidence of this. If sensory nerve fibers suffer from burns, the body may jolt away from the source, but the nerve fibers are already burned and unable to deflect the feeling (55). This absorption of the action of external sources is sensory affection. These affections of the body are then available as memory images to interpose themselves between excitations received from without, on the one hand, and the movements the body is about to execute, on the other. Affective sensations, information coming from the world but affecting our body, constitute a kind of memory (Bergson calls it ontological memory). While the subject pays attention perceptually to what interests it, that is, to what it can act on, affective memory slows down or even halts any possible response by filling those perceptual images with affective recollection. For instance, we might recoil this time *before* touching a hot surface upon which we have previously burned our fingers.⁸ What is crucial is that the affective interval complicates the

process, thereby acting as an invitation to act, to wait, or to do nothing (17-18). In other words, there is choice, not imperative, even on this most elemental of levels.

We see then that for Bergson, any creature with mobility is capable to a greater or lesser extent of choosing its actions. But if we return to Arendt, we recall that it is the activity, the choices, which pass between humans, that make it possible for humans to consider themselves political, while other species are not. So the question is, what activity passing between humans is uniquely a product of humanity and cannot be generalized to other species?

One possibility that comes to us from Arendt reading Kant is the claim that human reason, as the faculty of thinking, depends on and is only possible in a public community that can freely and openly examine every claim either verbally or in writing (Arendt, *Lectures* 39-40).⁹ The right or the ability to communicate freely with others in the public realm is certainly a political issue going back to the instantiation of the *vita activa*, free of life's necessities. In the *Critique of Judgment*, as Arendt points out, Kant frames public sense as that *critical faculty* which takes account of the manner in which everyone else represents their own thinking and seeks the judgment of the collective reason of human beings. To accomplish this we have to try to put ourselves in the position of everyone else while thinking for ourselves and thinking consistently. Putting ourselves in the place of everyone else is judgment. And judgment, here, is one with public sense, where public sense is the pleasure derived from taste, and the feeling of disinterested pleasure produced by imagination (Arendt, *Lectures* 42-43; Kant, *Critique* sect. 40: 293.25-296.15). With regard to non-human animals, it seems that we may question the limits of their ability to freely and openly examine claims made by members of the community. Thus, their universal morality is apparently intact, but their politics may be lacking. And what about us?

It is possible that the necessity of this sort of community points to the emergence of politics as a project of humanity and not of all species. However, its emergence does involve at least one inevitable conundrum in which understanding and imagination will succeed, but reason will be faced with its limit, which is contradiction. For according to Kant's moral philosophy, "man as a single individual, consulting nothing but his own reason, finds the maxim that is not self-contradictory, from which he can then derive an Imperative" (Arendt, *Lectures* 49). Only when the private maxim is made public and declared to be universal can it be a moral law, and only those private maxims that can be made public are legitimate. This leads, however, to some difficult conclusions. For example, Kant posits the universal moral maxim derived from reason that there shall be no war, that peace is an absolute moral duty, thereby making any and all revolutions unjust (Arendt, *Lectures* 47, 54; Kant, *Political* 174, 184; Kant, *History* 100). This is fine as long as rulers openly declare and act on the recognition of the rights of their citizens. But when they do not, we are left with a conflict between morality and politics, which is to say, between actors and spectators. And this is precisely the problem. If it were legitimate for a population to revolt in order to establish a new government, then that new government would have to be subject to the same maxim, and on and on perpetually, producing unending conflict rather than peace.¹⁰

Politics: Actor-Geniuses as Spectators with Taste

We addressed the question of whether or not politics is for non-human animals, and found ourselves almost immediately facing the same question for human animals. Even if we accept that non-human animals, like humans, are able to theorize and therefore to formulate moral maxims but are not able to practice politics, on what basis can there be legitimate political

action for humans? Earlier we stated that Kant frames public sense as that *critical faculty* which takes account of the manner in which everyone else represents their own thinking and seeks the judgment of the collective reason of human beings. This definition arises in the *Critique of Judgment, Book II, Analytic of the Sublime*, where Kant also defines sense as the feeling of pleasure and the *public* sense as taste, or “the faculty of estimating what makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable” (Kant, *Critique* sect. 40: 295.15-30). Indeed, as Lingis argued, as a pure possibility, no concept is needed to make a judgement of taste; many species co-exist in the same or similar sensory muck. Nevertheless, actually communicating a feeling verbally or in writing does seem to call for both Imagination and Understanding insofar as communication implies the use of concepts connected to Intuition in order to say anything at all. In principle, non-human animals might somehow be able to do this, that is, to connect concepts to Intuitions and to verbally communicate this. Although it seems odd that the judgment of the collective reason of human beings is a matter of pleasure and of taste, it appears for both Arendt and Kant to be crucial.

Arendt points out that taste along with smell are the most private sensations, overwhelmingly present or absent to us, associated with a particular object, and thereby the most subjective of the senses; they are what might be called *inner senses* (Arendt, *Lectures* 66) If you can’t stand the smell or taste of something, no one can convince you that you are mistaken about what you sense. And the beautiful, it seems, is this type of taste, as in the expression, “she has such beautiful taste.” Of course, once one expresses this verbally, once one is willing to make a public judgment, what is considered beautiful taste is no longer subjective but is truly now a matter of judgment, whereby we overcome our special subjective conditions for the sake of others (67). So for example, in acknowledgment of the relevance of others, the students and

professors who once wore the defiantly backwards baseball cap have traded it in for the hip straw fedora with the small brim. But no birds have meanwhile changed their colors based on their peers' comments regarding color preference, nor have chimps living together in their natural surroundings started to become concerned about shaving or hairstyles. Judgments of taste take others into account. First, I act; I choose to wear a straw fedora. Then, I sense my own taste; it pleases or displeases, I reflect upon it, I put myself in the place of others and become, as Arendt calls it, a spectator as much as an actor (23, 68-69). And hopefully, I may then approve of my own taste. But only insofar as others do too will I feel a disinterested delight in the approval itself.

But if tastes change, how is it possible that they change? As we have seen, Kant disapproves of revolution, and given his principles, even gradual change might appear to be immoral if not irrational—unless, of course, it is somehow implemented by Nature itself. To implement this, something special is needed, something that calls for genius. In other words, both aesthetic and political change, insofar as they are possible, would be the role of genius (Arendt, *Lectures* 61-62). Artists who create beautiful art must have taste which supplies them with guidance, clearness, and order, as well as talent cultivated in schools. But they also require genius, such that beautiful art may even present ugly things as beautiful! This sort of transformation occurs because the work of art is not distinguishable from the object *in our sensation*, our inner sense. The artist may thus use allegory or pleasing attributes to make something ugly into something beautiful (Kant, *Critique*, sect. 48: 312.10-15).

The beautiful work of art is the product of spirit, the animating principle of the mind, the faculty of *aesthetical Ideas*, which are the counterpart of *rational Ideas* (Kant, *Critique*, sect. 49: 313.20-314.20-5). Aesthetical Ideas are the product of Imagination, which operates analogically,

and for which no concept is adequate. Analogically, Imagination creates another nature when experience is too *commonplace* and what we *feel* is our freedom from the law of association ([p.q.r]) = [(p.q).r]) (sect. 49: 314.0-30). The means by which genius accomplishes this is to generate an Idea associated with a concept but bound up with a multiplicity of partial representations such that no single definite concept is implicated and the association of empirical representations is defeated. Imagination thereby provides Understanding with abundant new material to quicken and possibly challenge cognitive powers without violently overthrowing them (sect. 49: 315.15-30).

Art is defined as production through freedom, indicating that a will with Reason lies at the basis of free actions (Kant, *Critique* sect. 43: 303.30-5). In its design, the beautiful work of art must be like *nature*, free from constraint with respect to our faculties. In other words, no concepts can determine it. This is how we have aesthetical judgment; it is due to Imagination's free play of faculties, when Understanding remains undetermined and does not judge according to a concept. Reason's interest in the accord between objective reality and our subjective judgment leads to the realization that produces beautiful, natural things—the realization that nature provides a rule for beauty. Therefore, beautiful art must look like nature, but since it cannot be merely the effect of mechanical laws as nature is, art cannot be the product of nature's laws. For this reason, the creation of art requires something beyond mere nature and mechanical laws. It requires a special type of actor, the genius, for “genius is the innate mental disposition through which nature gives the rule to Art” (sect. 46: 307.5).

Nature, which is mechanical, gives a rule, but genius interprets it. If a work of art is beautiful, it may not be determined by any concept, but a rule of some kind must determine that beautiful artifice is at least possible. Indeed this occurs, but it is beautiful art only as long as the

rule remains *indefinite*. Only the actions of a genius can produce a beautiful work of art that is not the product of any definite ideal. This is the meaning of *originality*. The work of art produced by the genius is original insofar as no determinate rule is given for it. Additionally, it is *exemplary*. It is a model that sets a standard, which is a rule for other works of art that will necessarily be less original and therefore less exemplary. And finally, since they do not arise from a determinate rule of nature, no one—not even the genius—knows where her ideas come from, that is, how they take on determinate form (Kant, *Critique* sect. 46: 307.15-308.15). Yet, acts of genius alone are not enough. As we have noted, taste is also essential. It is the faculty of judging that communicates our feeling in a representation without a concept (Kant, *Critique* sect. 40; cited in Arendt, *Lectures* 72). In order to make this feeling communicable, the genius actor must also be a spectator, for the faculty of taste is the faculty of the spectators; the faculty assenting to the ideas of genius actors is the public sense. As Arendt concludes, a critic and spectator sit *in* every genius actor and fabricator. Without this critical, judging faculty the actor genius would be so isolated from the spectator that she or her work would not even be perceived (Arendt, *Lectures* 62-3).¹¹

But why limit genius to art? Is not the originator of political ideas, ideas that are then able to be the foundation of the political community also the work of a spectator, actor genius? And the name of such ideas, I would propose, is “factual truth.” Although we may be astounded that there is any concern in politics for truth, truth of a certain type, factual truth, may lie at the heart of political community and action. Factual truths, as distinguished from conceptual understanding, as well as rational truth and its opposite, opinion, are “a political problem of the first order” (Arendt, *Between* 237). What do we mean by factual truth? Let us look at one outstanding case of political action and judgment.

Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic have been charged by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) with genocide and crimes against humanity, for crimes perpetrated against the civilian population throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the sniping campaign against civilians in Sarajevo, and for the taking of UN peacekeepers as hostages and their use as human shields. The indictment was issued in 1995 even though Karadzic was not captured and arrested until July of 2008. Hearings against Karadzic and Mladic began in July of 1996, ordered by Judges Claude Jorda and Fouad Riad. Only a small portion of the evidence against the two accused was presented to the full Trial Chamber. For the hearing, the Prosecutor called a dozen witnesses, including expert, policy and eyewitnesses. In a summary of the evidence, the Prosecutor wrote that Mladic “has effectively controlled the Bosnian Serb Army throughout the war although he has deferred to Dr. Karadzic as the overall leader of the Republika Srpska.” Before the takeover of Srebrenica, Mladic told Colonel Karremans that “the fate of the Muslims lay in his hands” (ICTY). This fate was described by Judge Riad as “scenes from Hell, written on the darkest pages of human history” (ICTY).

As cases such as this make clear, factual truths are truths “seen and witnessed with the eyes of the body, and not the eyes of the mind” (Arendt, *Between* 237). They require the testimony of civilian and military eyewitnesses, medical and other experts, journalists and specialists in human rights policy. Factual truth is much more slippery than rational truth for it concerns events and circumstances usually witnessed by many people. It requires testimony and evidence to support it, and it exists *only to the extent that it is spoken about*. It requires spectators with a taste for truth. But also, it requires a truth teller, the actor genius of the political realm who possesses the same qualities as the artistic actor genius. Like the work of artistic genius, the truth of political genius may not be determined by a concept. This truth is *original* insofar as no

determinate rule is given for it. It is *exemplary* insofar as it sets a standard, a rule for other factual truths.

In this light we can appreciate the purpose of the ICTY evidence hearings. Their purpose and mission allows evidence to be presented but also refuted. It is:

To enable the voices of victims of the alleged crimes to be heard in a public, international forum. In this case, these victims will represent the civilian population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the city of Sarajevo, and the “safe area” of Srebrenica. To demonstrate that the accused are charged with serious crimes which by their nature must be judged by an independent and impartial judicial body, namely the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Should the accused wish to clear their names, to see their futures not dominated by these indictments and their potential status as fugitives from international justice, they must appear before the Tribunal. (ICTY)

Impartiality is of supreme importance because if the teller of factual truth were to identify herself with some partial interest, some power formation, she would compromise herself. She would lose the precise quality that could have made her truth appear plausible, which is “personal truthfulness, guaranteed by impartiality, integrity, independence” (Arendt, *Between* 250). It is to be hoped that the testimony and evidence gathered in an international court of law meets these important standards and that the teller of truths, the political actor-spectator genius has a place in the political system as both original and as exemplary. That Arendt locates truth-telling as an activity that takes place under the jurisdiction of judges in an international court makes sense, for it might have been the Nuremberg trials after World War II which inspired Arendt to pursue the very possibility of factual truth and truth-telling genius.

One crucial aspect of this account is that factual truth should not be confused with mere opinion. The gathering of evidence and the testimony of witnesses is not simply the right to an opinion. The right to an opinion is meaningless unless factual truth is agreed upon and not in dispute (Arendt, *Between* 238). No less than conceptual understanding and rational truth, factual

truth is opposed to opinion in its mode of asserting validity. Factual truth is coercive in the same way the beautiful work of art is coercive: you must have taste, that most personal of senses, to appreciate it. So, for example, in spite of many powerful obfuscations about genocides or environmental devastation around the world, the factual truth about these events will be told, and when it is, its authority is coercive, even despotic. Like a work of art that is beautiful, factual truths are true and not subject to opinion or interpretation, they remain stubbornly and infuriatingly true (240-1).

What is annoying about factual truth is that it is contingent. It could have happened otherwise but it did not. For this reason, it requires intensive effort to uncover evidence. It thus calls for a truth teller, the actor-spectator genius of the political realm who possesses the same qualities as the artistic actor-spectator genius. The implication is that it calls for communication on the part of truth tellers who act and judge within a political community of spectators whose views are disinterested, but who also have a taste for the truth (Arendt, *Between* 242-3). This means that factual truth also calls for public sense, which we defined as that *critical faculty* that takes account of the manner in which everyone else represents their own thinking and seeks the judgment of the collective reason of human beings.

This is of course not an ideal situation. Politics and political actions are difficult, far more difficult than conceptual understanding. This is because the truth revealed by political genius is not simply the application of a concept to a set of intuitions. As both original, so not subject to a determinate rule, and exemplary, the work of political genius sets a standard, a rule for other factual truths, a rule for other political actions. The political genius must remain independent of interests and power formations. Her original and exemplary act emerges from her personal truthfulness, her impartiality, integrity, and independence. But in addition, the factual truth

revealed by the truth teller requires free agreement among many spectators. This is the discursive, representative thinking that is judgment. Judgment is defined as the ability to assume as many different standpoints as possible for a given issue, while one takes up the point of view of a spectator rather than a participant (Arendt, *Between* 241, 247).

We began by asking if non-human animals are political, and this lead to the inquiry into whether or not humans are political. Non-human animals it seems, clearly evince rational ability. They formulate theories, then act on them. Perhaps we can even say that insofar as all of the necessities of some species of animal life are carried out with and among other animals, many animal species are social. These characteristics extend their behavior into the ethical sphere but not the political. Let us be clear about this. Action and speech occur between human beings but they leave no tangible objects behind; they merely constitute something intangible, a web of human relations (Arendt, *Human* 182-3). Because of this, because the truth-revealing quality of action and speech are tied to the flux of human life, or the web of human relations, they can only be represented or “reified” through repetition or imitation. The ancient Greeks wrote plays to re-enact great events, stories whose meaning was given to the spectators through the poetry of the chorus. This, says Arendt, is what makes the Greek theater the “political sphere par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art” (188). The Greek plays make the political actions of human beings into something durable. They represent to the people the reality of action and speech, they organize relations between humans, the acting and speaking that are the *polis*, the space where humans appear to one another (198-9). This human reality is political reality. Perhaps like the Greeks, we can still find a way to remember the acts of political genius that will allow us to constitute a truly human *polis* and so to form a community where truth telling is essential to political life.

Notes

¹ The use of the term “men” is in keeping with Arendt’s own text. The term “human” or “woman” could be substituted by the reader as there is no intention here to designate politics as a male activity.

² Arendt cites St. Augustine *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*) xix. 2, 19.

³ Arendt cites Aristotle, *Politics* 1333a30ff, 1332b32, 1332b2.

⁴ Also Aristotle, *Politics*, 1325a24.

⁵ In other words, the Cartesian cogito is not adequate to guarantee reality (Arendt, *Life* 19-20).

⁶ See Wurtz and Repetto (2003) and Connor and Micklethwaite Peterson (1994).

⁷ See Bosveld, “Chimps Plan Ahead (Plan #1: Throw Rocks at Humans).”

⁸ See Olkowski, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*, pp. 95-98, especially p. 97. See also Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, ch.1, especially pp. 17-22.

⁹ This is perhaps more Arendt than Kant.

¹⁰ Arendt argues that real revolutions are public and that Kant’s criterion of publicity applies only to the rejection of private coups, however, this still does not reconcile the demand for peace with the demand for change.

¹¹ See also Dostal, “Judging Human Action: Arendt’s Appropriation of Kant.” Dostal appears to miss this crucial part of Arendt’s reading of Kant, where she specifically and at length brings together spectator and actor in the person of the genius, as well as the clearly stated analogy she draws between works of art and politics.

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