

The Concept of History in Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*

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Abstract

In the opening pages of the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt links history to both judgment and action. She finds any idea of progress in history to be “against human dignity.” Against this background, Arendt outlines a stark choice between a Hegelian philosophy of history which she finds deeply distasteful and a Kantian option with which “we can maintain [...] the autonomy of the minds of men.” This article explores both sides of this fork by detailing exactly what it is that Arendt finds objectionable in Hegel and just how it is that she sees herself aligning with Kant. This article then indicates ways in which Arendt departs from both these philosophers in order to develop her own robust theorization of the concept of history in relation to her ongoing concerns with judgment and with action.

History appears as a concept in Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* in relation to the central category of her political thought: action. The primary condition of possibility for action is plurality, "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt [1958] 1998, 7). But "all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics," and one of the most important of these is history; because every human being is historically conditioned, so is every action (Arendt [1958] 1998, 7). Arendt's discussion of history therefore inquires into what sort of relationship to the past enables action in the present. For Arendt, the concept of history has a particular relationship with tradition. She firmly rejects German historicism, with a particular distaste for teleology and rigid, deterministic views of history that she associates most of all with Hegel. At the end of her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt clearly states her view that "it is against human dignity to believe in progress" (Arendt 1982, 77). Arendt finds it important for history to be more than a planless aggregate of human actions, but teleology cannot provide the requisite plan because

history is a story which has many beginnings but no end. The end in any strict and final sense of the word could only be the disappearance of man from the earth. For whatever the historian calls an end, the end of a period of a tradition or a whole civilization, is a new beginning for those who are alive (Arendt 1994, 320).

Thus, politics requires history as an adequate ground for action; we need a relationship with the past that is advantageous for human life. In order to revitalize the concept of history, Arendt looks back to another tradition: that of the ancient Greeks. Arendt turns to the Kantian critique of the power of judgment to elaborate the role of the historian as judge who, like Homer, affirms human dignity by inquiring impartially into the events of the past.

In the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, therefore, Arendt offers an account of history that imbricates it with both judgment and action. In the 'Postscriptum' to *Thinking*, a passage from the first volume of Arendt's last work *The Life of the Mind* that opens the 1982 book edited by Ronald Beiner, Arendt writes:

Since the past, being past, becomes subject to our judgment, judgment, in turn, would be a mere preparation for willing. This is undeniably the perspective, and, within limits, the legitimate perspective, of man insofar as he is an acting being (Arendt 1982, 3).

Human action remains Arendt's primary concern; willing, and judging prior to that, are preparations for it. Judgments of the past are of particular importance in preparation for willing. Consider the range of figures, across a spectrum of political positions, who all make claims that "history shall be the judge." Such statements are basically useful for action in the present, whether as justification or motivation. Claims like "history shall be the judge" often opt for one of two grammars: either they assume that history acts like God, dispensing divine judgment at the end of time, or they claim that history has a direction and that aligning with this direction is proof enough of the rightness of their actions (Jay 2024). As Arendt glosses this latter view, "since Hegel and Marx" questions of "theory and practice" and "all attempts to arrive at a halfway plausible theory of ethics [...] have been treated in the perspective of History and on the assumption that there is such a thing as Progress of the human race"

(Arendt 1982, 5). For Arendt, this understanding of history is deeply distasteful. At this juncture, Arendt says, “we either can say with Hegel: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, leaving the ultimate judgment to Success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men” (Arendt 1982, 5). In what follows, I consider the substance of the Hegelian and the Kantian options as Arendt presents them before elaborating on Arendt’s own subsequent development of the concept of history.^[1]

On Arendt’s view, Hegel’s philosophy of history has a deeply detrimental effect on the human capacity for action. Arendt’s claim is not unique; many postwar thinkers who had been raised in the German tradition (for instance, Karl Popper [1962, 78–80]) blamed Hegel for paving the way to the German assault on human dignity and autonomy that they saw as culminating in the Third Reich. Yet Arendt has perspicacious philosophical reasons for her opposition to Hegel, which we can better grasp if we return to his own writings. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel does indeed give an account of world history as “the *universal spirit, the spirit of the world* [...] which exercises its right [...] over finite spirits in *world history* as the *world’s court of judgment* [*Weltgericht*]” (Hegel [1820] 1991, §340).^[2]

Hegel’s claim here can best be understood as an instance of his larger point in the *Philosophy of Right* that despite the world seeming irrational, world history is a “necessary development” of reason itself. As Hegel puts it:

It is not just the *power* of spirit which passes judgement in world history — i.e. it is not the abstract and irrational necessity of a blind fate. On the contrary, since spirit in and for itself is *reason*, and since the being-for-itself of reason in spirit is knowledge, world history is the necessary development, from the *concept* of the freedom of spirit alone, of the *moments* of reason and hence of spirit’s self-consciousness and freedom. It [viz. world history] is the exposition and the *actualization of the universal spirit* (Hegel [1820] 1991, §342).

Hegel could be understood here as arguing that world history does not involve determinism and domination; rather, history is precisely the free realization of reason. Hegel is not thereby claiming that history *appears* orderly. To the contrary, disorder is a basic feature of history, which displays “the ceaseless turmoil not just of external contingency, but also of passions, interests, ends, talents and virtues, violence, wrongdoing, and vices in their inner particularity”

(Hegel [1820] 1991, §340). But understood properly, within this contingent mess one can perceive the plan of reason, much like how a natural philosopher can observe the petals of flowers and discover within it the most strict of mathematical rules (such as the Fibonacci sequence). Does the philosopher “impose” a pattern of reason on the external world? In some sense, perhaps so; if you spend all day at the blackboard, you will be more likely to see mathematical patterns in the meadow when you finally go outside for a walk. But such “imposition” is far from that of a mysterious “spirit” violently dominating the world. Indeed, Hegel wants to suggest not only that we are not *forced* to comply with reason (the judgments of the “world court”) but also that manifesting reason in our actions just *is* being free. As Allen Wood puts it, for Hegel “freedom is possible only to the extent that we act rationally,

and in circumstances where the objects of our action are in harmony with our reason” (Hegel [1820] 1991, xii). Therefore, identifying reason as manifest in world history is not any sort of constraint of human freedom for Hegel but rather a demonstration of it.

Yet, for Arendt, this is all beside the point. Hegel’s account of the actualization of reason in history — whether reason is understood as being exercised through domination or through conforming to natural laws of the world — struggles to give a robust account of human action. Action is the linchpin of an Arendtian concept of freedom, which is far from any account on which freedom is the end of any action or the manifestation of some universal principle such as reason. Instead, to be free for Arendt just is to act – on the sole condition that is being human. In particular, Arendt says that “plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (Arendt [1958] 1998, 8). Action itself is the realization, the full performance, of this human condition of plurality. Thus, freedom is immanent in the fact that we are all born unique and are therefore able to act, that is to introduce something new into the world. This is what Arendt famously called ‘natality’: “with each new birth, a new beginning is born into the world, a new world has potentially come into being” (Arendt [1951] 1958, 465). Natality in turn makes freedom possible: “the miracle of freedom is inherent in this ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning” (Arendt 2005, 113).

For Arendt, Hegel’s claims would threaten to treat plurality merely as a byproduct of the actualization of reason in the world, rather than the condition of possibility for freedom. Thus, Hegel writes that

the states, nations, and individuals involved in this business of the world spirit emerge with their own *particular and determinate principle*, which has as its interpretation and actuality in their *constitution* and throughout the whole *extent* of their *condition*. In their consciousness of this actuality and in their preoccupation with its interests, they are at the same time the unconscious instruments and organs [*bewußtlose Werkzeuge und Glieder*] of that inner activity in which the shapes which they themselves assume pass away, while the spirit in and for itself prepares and works its way towards the transition to its next and higher stage (Hegel [1820] 1991, §344).

For Hegel, particular differences and contingent human actions are all “instruments and organs” of the “inner activity” of “spirit” as it “prepares and works its way towards the transition to its next and higher stage.” According to Arendt, Hegel’s picture of world-spirit puts man in such a bind as to leave him no space for movement and action, and thus without true freedom. Arendt almost seems to have passages like these from Hegel in mind when she writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that totalitarian rule “substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions” (Arendt [1951] 1958, 465–66). The fact that these laws are “rational” is what makes lawful totalitarianism even worse than arbitrary tyranny. “Far from being ‘lawless’,” Arendt says, totalitarianism “goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation” so “that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to

these suprahuman forces than any government ever was before” (Arendt [1951] 1958, 461). Because totalitarian rule presumes to follow only “the law of History or the law of Nature,” it “claims to be a higher form of legitimacy which, since it is inspired by the sources themselves, can do away with petty legality” (Arendt [1951] 1958, 462). For Arendt, Hegel’s account of freedom as possible only when our actions are in harmony with the laws of reason is as likely as totalitarianism is to “destroy the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space” (Arendt [1951] 1958, 466). True action, for Arendt, requires space for movement, which is what makes freedom possible.

What is Arendt’s alternative? At times, it seems like she wants to lean back towards a more Kantian conception of human dignity and autonomy (that is, giving the law to oneself). This seems to be the implication of that choice which Arendt presents in the ‘Postscriptum’ to *Thinking* (which Beiner includes at the beginning of his edition of the Kant lectures):

Finally we shall be left with the only alternative there is in these matters – we either can say with Hegel: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, leaving the ultimate judgment to Success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or as they have come into being (Arendt 1982, 5).

Yet Arendt is no thoroughgoing Kantian. Or, better put, her reading of Kant’s political philosophy, she readily admits, goes quite contrary to some of Kant’s most cherished principles. For instance, plurality as Arendt conceives it is quite opposed to Kant’s conception of Man as a “reasonable being, subject to the laws of practical reason which he gives to himself, autonomous, an end in himself” (Arendt 1982, 27). By contrast, in her interpretation of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, Arendt is concerned with men as “earthbound creatures, living in communities, endowed with common sense, *sensus communis*, a community sense” (Arendt 1982, 27). While Arendt cares about human dignity, she cannot accept the Kantian formulation of dignity as individual autonomy because that would leave no space for plurality and thus for movement, the prerequisites for free action.

Where Arendt sees herself aligning most with Kant is as a kindred spirit – another philosopher who is basically concerned as she is with equality, critical thought, and the rights of man. In the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, she makes this point by quoting approvingly an autobiographical passage where Kant writes: “I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that [what I am doing] can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of mankind” (Arendt 1982, 29).^[3] This feeling of affinity with Kant underlies her reading of his work. She continuously makes dismissive references to Kant’s philosophy of history^[4], but her attitude is actually more ambiguous than it might seem, as both the autobiographical remarks and the passage from the ‘Postscriptum’ to *Thinking* make clear.

Kant’s own views as developed in his 1784 essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” are rather complex, balancing teleology, individual human dignity, and a robust sense of rational freedom. In these deeper respects, Arendt’s philosophy of history aligns significantly with Kant’s. This is not just because of the importance of the faculty of judgment drawn from her reading of Kant’s third critique. Rather, the sense of history as

judgment of the past itself is not entirely foreign to Kant. He presents his “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” as “only a thought of that which a philosophical mind (which besides this would have to be very well versed in history [*geschichtskundig*]) could attempt from another standpoint” (Kant [1784] 2009, 120; 8: 130). The aim of his “idea of a world history,” Kant says, is not at all to *displace* the writing of empirical history but merely to offer a “guiding thread” (*Leitfaden*), namely, that of a “cosmopolitan purpose,” by which a plan can be perceived “even in the play of human freedom” that is exhibited in the aggregate of human actions we call history (*Geschichte*). Arendt, too, thinks that “we may reclaim our human dignity, win it back, as it were, from the pseudo-divinity named History of the modern age, without denying history’s importance but denying its right to being the ultimate judge” (Arendt 1982, 5). The only true judges of history are we human beings, the inquirers who by relating history sit in judgment over it. What we must do is tell history in such a way as to win back our dignity by assuming responsibility as judges of our own actions.

At his most radical, this is what Kant too seems to suggest: a “philosophical history” has as its primary product a “guiding thread for exhibiting an otherwise planless *aggregate* of human actions, at least in the large, as a *system*,” and in particular one that “aims at the perfect civil union of the human species” (Kant [1784] 2009, 120; 8: 130). The role the philosopher assumes with respect to empirical history, for Kant, is of an inquirer (*Forscher*) for such guiding threads. Although the philosopher, like the historian, is rightly a “researcher [*Forscher*] by inclination,” the “thirst for cognition and the eager restlessness to proceed further in it” cannot alone “constitute the honor of humankind”; rather, the philosopher, says Kant, must “learn to honor human beings” (Kant [1764–1765] 2011, 96; 20: 44). Rather than just a seeker of knowledge, says Arendt, “the historian is the inquiring man who by relating it [viz. the past] sits in judgment over it” (Arendt 1982, 5). Despite their substantial differences, then, where Arendt and Kant align are in their views of the work of the historian, who gleans resources from the past for the present – almost “like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths [...] and bring them up into the world of the living as ‘thought fragments’” (Arendt 1968, 50–51).^[5] Thus, the researcher (*Forscher*), whether philosopher or historian, serves the role of bringing the past into the present, the realm of living and acting human beings.

The deepest way we can honor human beings, Arendt thinks, is by recognizing within each of us the capacity to judge, will, and act. Neither the world-spirit nor God sits at the end of history, glancing back and tallying up human actions. But neither does history appear merely as a planless aggregate. For to see it as such is to disregard one of our other basic capacities as humans: our ability to create art and tell stories and thus structure the world. This is why Arendt turns to Homer when she wants to give her own account of the concept of history. She tells us that the “oldest meaning of this word, which, like so many other terms in our political and philosophical language, is Greek in origin,” is derived from “*historein*, to inquire in order to tell how it was – *legein ta eonta* in Herodotus” (Arendt 1982, 5). *Legein ta eonta* means “telling the things,” which resonates with Arendt’s stress in *The Human Condition* on the interdependence of human beings and the things of the world: “because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence”

(Arendt [1958] 1998, 9). Arendt thus recognizes two principal meanings of “history” – the events of the past, and the record of such events as narrated by human beings – and how each depends on the other. The human artifice needs to be suitable for action and speech, just as “the ‘doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words’ will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed” (Arendt [1958] 1998, 174) without the narration provided by historians and artists after the fact. They do this by endowing perishable deeds, actions, and speech with the permanence of fabrication which arrests their perishability by enabling them to “enter and be at home in the world of everlastingness” (Arendt 1961, 43). “The task of the poet and historiographer” thus “consists in making something lasting out of remembrance”; what transforms “single events and occurrences into history” is that one’s own deeds and sufferings now become a story, “an ‘object’ for all to see and to hear” (Arendt 1961, 45).

It is at this point that judgment enters the picture. For history is not just the work of the storyteller, but also of the judge: “the origin of this verb [i.e. *historein*] is again Homer (*Iliad* XVIII) where the noun *histor* (‘historian’, as it were) occurs, and that Homeric historian is the judge” (Arendt 1982, 5). We can discern a three-step process in this account of history as Arendt develops it in the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. First, the action is performed — an action whose only real condition is plurality, that is the fact that “men rather than Man” (Arendt 1982, 40) are born into the world. Second, this action is transformed into a thing outside of the actor by the poet, that is the *homo faber*, who transforms *praxis* (acts) through *poiesis* (fabrication). Third, this object now exists in the world separate from the actor or the storyteller, such that it can become the object of a judgment.

Historical judgment of this sort lies quite apart from what Arendt calls “scientific objectivity,” but it can lay claim to “the highest type of objectivity we know,” the impartiality that “came into the world when Homer decided to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans” (Arendt 1961, 51). The question of just how such impartial judgments are possible is in many ways what motivates Arendt’s reading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* in the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. Kant’s aesthetics are particularly appealing for Arendt because they offer a link between the faculty of judgment on the one hand (preparatory for willing and thus for action) and art-objects that Arendt had placed so much importance in for her conception of history, as we have seen. To judge in this sense means to think from another’s point of view, “to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects” (Arendt 1961, 51). This is what history means as a condition for politics, in the end: the judgments of the past we make represent not just a collection of mere opinions (*doxai*) but rather the way the world appears (*dokei moi*) to people in the plural. This is what Arendt calls with Kant an “enlarged mentality,” which “means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (Arendt 1982, 43). The actor, “because he is involved, never sees the meaning of the whole,” but the beautiful object “is, in Kantian terms, an end in itself because all its possible meaning is contained within itself, without reference to others” (Arendt 1982, 77). To make a judgment of the particular object as beautiful means that one “judges always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s *sensus communis*” (Arendt 1982, 75). History makes deeds into objects over which each of us as a human being, not as an instance of universal Man but rather as “a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being

human” (Arendt 1982, 75), can sit in judgment; by enabling such judgments, history contributes to the creation of a world that can stabilize ephemeral human actions and in turn make room for politics.

Footnotes

- 1 For the purposes of this paper, I leave aside Hannah Arendt’s engagement with Marx’s philosophy of history, primarily because I wish to focus on the options she presents here in the beginning of the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, where the choice is clearly between a broadly Hegelian conception of progress in history which includes Marx and a Kantian option which maintains “the autonomy of the minds of men.” This is not to downplay the significance of Marx for Arendt’s thought, but rather to recognize with Waseem Yaqoob that “although Marx was an important figure in Arendt’s intellectual development in the early 1950s, he was a starting point for a number of concerns, rather than her sole interest” (Yaqoob 2014, 388).
- 2 *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* is translated by Michael Rosen as “the history of the world is the Last Judgment.” It is originally a line from a 1786 poem by Friedrich Schiller, *Resignation*. For the Hegelian development thereof, see further Rosen (2014, 267–68). (In this, as in subsequent quotations, all italics are retained from the English translation listed in the bibliography.)
- 3 The translation and the editorial addition in square brackets are Arendt’s own. The original passage is in Kant’s “Remarks in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*” (Kant [1764–1765] 2011, 96; 20: 44).
- 4 For instance: “Kant’s concept of history, though quite important in its own right, is not central to his philosophy”; “what matters [for Kant] in history, whose haphazard, contingent melancholy he never forgot, are not the stories, not the historical individuals, nothing that men did of good or evil, but the secret ruse of nature”; “Kant is never interested in the past; what interests him is the future of the species” (Arendt 1982, 8).
- 5 Arendt uses the metaphor of the pearl-diver (which she borrows from *The Tempest*) to describe Walter Benjamin’s historiography, but recent work has demonstrated how applicable it is to her own concept of history, too. As Liesbeth Schoonheim reminds us, after all, “it was Arendt who was entrusted with the manuscript of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940) and she read it while waiting for the boat that brought her to safety in New York” (Schoonheim 2020, 846). Along these lines, Seyla Benhabib writes that Arendt’s oeuvre as a whole “must be viewed as an ‘exercise’ in thought, the chief task of which is to dig under the rubble of history and to recover those ‘pearls’ of past experience, with their sedimented and hidden layers of meaning, so as to cull from them a story that can orient the mind in the future” (Benhabib 1990, 171). On the relationship of Benjamin and Arendt, see also Villa (1996, 8–10).

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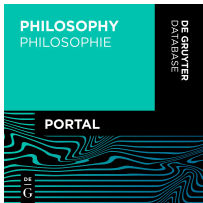
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