

Arendt in Crisis: Political Thought in Between Past and Future

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As media consumers, we are perpetually being informed of one crisis or the other: plummeting markets, diplomatic breakdowns, influenza pandemics, disastrous floods, and so on. The point of social vulnerability may seem to migrate, but at no moment is the collective unexposed to danger. It even seems that complex social life presents itself to us most palpably in the form of crisis: we only learn about financial institutions, international relations, and delicate ecosystems when they are subject to grave disturbances. This is not to dispute the existence of systemic problems, only to look at how we often come to register them. Minor imperfections in vast organizational entities are not very good at claiming our attention

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whereas a full-scale crisis warrants emotional mobilization and demands immediate interventions.

If the announcement of crisis is one way in which the media direct our awareness to issues (Luhmann 1996, 53-81), this act could be of interest to literary and cultural studies, insofar as these disciplines analyze the staging of events and the prevalent scripts for narrating society (Wald 2008, 3). (There is also the crisis *in* the humanities (Perloff 2000), but this is not a spectacle that can count on a horrified audience outside of academia, and hence it fails as a communicative endeavor; it cannot, in other words, be used to stir up public sentiment.) Yet the ubiquity and even triviality of crisis and its use as a mechanism for the allocation of our attention and efforts may have rendered it unserviceable as a theoretical tool. Since various crises are being declared on a daily basis, and executives worry about how to “turn crisis into opportunity,” the concept’s power of illumination may seem to have faded; routine invocations have turned it into a synonym for any bad situation.¹

In this context, the work of Hannah Arendt can, I believe, revivify our sense of the concept’s specificity and productiveness.² Many of her analyses of modernity have attracted considerable interest in contemporary cultural theory: she is recognized as a critic of the notion of human rights, as a theorist of imperialism and genocide, and as one of the most important proponents of the intrinsic value of political action. As such, she has been an important reference for contemporary philosophers like Giorgio Agamben.³ She is, however, hardly read for her understanding of crisis as an affliction particular to modern societies.

Yet a notion of crisis is central to Arendt’s work and absolutely vital to her conception of politics. The interrelation of these two concepts—politics and crisis—can be summarized simply. According to Arendt, politics is fundamentally about the relationship of human beings with one another, the nature of their bond, the principles that unite them, and the very frame of the multiple local and temporary projects they undertake together. Crisis on the other hand names the dissolution and possible reconstitution of human communities: it is the moment when the community’s taken-for-granted integrity is threatened. It follows, then, that crisis is central to politics, for the supreme political question of human interconnection is brought to light in times of crisis: we are called upon to reaffirm or deny our previously established mutual bonds, a project that cannot fail to involve disputes and realignments. In crisis, Arendt contends, politics as a particular discourse and practice becomes unavoidable for all. Crisis is not just a synonym for disaster, but names the moment in which we are forced to become political beings.

To understand crisis in Arendt’s work is, therefore, to understand her vision of the urgency of politics or the way in which the possibility of polit-

ical discourse and action erupts in society. If Arendt is not known for this perspective, it is perhaps because it requires considerable reconstruction. The moment of crisis is not simply a theme among others in her writings but rather a difficulty that surfaces in the form of contradictory storylines and paradoxical formulations. As we shall see in the analysis of crisis and politics, Arendt's political thought shares in the destabilizing events that necessitate political conduct: she, too, wonders about how crises can play out and what resources societies possess when responding to imminent fragmentation. Is there, her work implicitly asks, some way of negotiating the troubling affinity between vigorous dissent and total dissolution? The task of specifying the relationship between crisis and politics in Arendt's thought can, therefore, not be reduced to the simple extraction of an idea from her work: we can retrieve her answer to the question of crisis only through attention to the textual elaboration of her thinking.

What is a Crisis?

What is a crisis? Hannah Arendt never poses this question explicitly, but it is nonetheless central to her work. In *Between Past and Future*, her collection of eight "exercises in political thought," the third and the fourth essays are entitled, respectively, "What is Authority?" and "What is Freedom?" The following two texts bear the titles "The Crisis in Education" and "The Crisis in Culture." If one combines the recurrent elements of these titles, one arrives at a question that is never explicitly posed in the volume yet inscribed within it: What is—a crisis?

As I will try to show in this essay, this implicit question is an eminently political one; the field of politics, as Arendt pictures it, is revealed through crisis. If she does not formulate the question of crisis directly, it is not because the answer would be banal or unimportant. On the contrary, the question is not explicitly formulated, firmly placed and dealt with in an individual essay because it structures the entire collection. The question "what is a crisis?" remains unarticulated at the midpoint of the book only because it is the pivot around which the eight texts revolve. The confrontation with a series of fundamental and interlinked crises that affect the status of authority, culture, education, or tradition, drives the work of thought and compels it in certain directions, but the attempted response to these crises also organizes the volume's overarching mode of presentation. What a methodical reading of *Between Past and Future's* underlying narrative reveals is, in the end, an entanglement of two problems, namely the central problem of politics in the modern world as it emerges in and through perplexing crises on the one hand and the problem of systematically reflecting upon and writing about politics on the other.

How does the moment of crisis set up Arendt's inquiries into the history of politics and political thought? Conventionally, crisis designates a point at which habitual reactions are no longer adequate and previous experiences provide no guidance. It names the moment at which some event or development exceeds an agent's present ability to cope. A crisis occurs, then, when a social system lacks the capacity and means to ensure its continued existence (Habermas 1973, 11). The fact that crises per definition overwhelm competences reveals the frequent talk of "crisis management" to be oxymoronic: a crisis is precisely that which we cannot hope to manage, for the problems that appear cannot be resolved with existing tools or within established frameworks. The "sustainable configuration of relations" is at the breaking point (Cazdyn 2007, 647).

Arendt does not stray far from this basic notion of crisis but approaches it without alarm, undistracted by the noise that surrounds this word. In the essay, "Crisis in Education," she writes that the crisis, whatever its origins or causes, "tears away façades and obliterates prejudices" and that this "disappearance of prejudices" implies that "we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realizing that they were originally answers to questions" (Arendt 1977, 174). In a crisis, a question finally appears as a question. Such a moment requires responsiveness to the situation or a willingness to consider fundamental problems anew, and in this way, the crisis invites us to "explore and inquire into whatever has been laid bare of the essence of the matter" (174). The crisis does not only reveal a gap between a problem we are forced to confront and our present capacity to resolve it, but is also, more affirmatively, presented as an opportunity for thought. For example, the essence of education, suddenly laid bare by crisis, is the fact that human beings are born into the world rather than arrive as perfect copies of those who already inhabit it, which means that they must be slowly introduced to and initially even protected from the human community with its conventions and norms.

In a crisis, a question appears, a question about what something is in its essence. The crisis is, therefore, an alternative name for the moment in which one asks what something is. In fact, the question, "What is a crisis?," may not appear in the collection of essays because it involves the duplication of a verbal gesture and appears almost tautological. Translated into Arendt's idiom, the question reads: "What is the moment in which one can ask what something is?" We can, however, reformulate this question in more historical terms to remove the impression of needless repetition: how can a particular development or situation force a questioning that concerns the essence or the ground of central human activities, such as authority or education? Rendered in this way, the question, "What is a crisis?," suggests that criticism

and reflection tend to arise when we are knocked off balance. Reassessment and reorientation are not practices that we willingly engage in out of our sheer commitment to critical thought. Inert and path-dependent as we are, opportunities of thought are forced upon us rather than freely chosen: we need to be pushed into a state of crisis before we start reviewing our situation. As the historian Reinhart Koselleck asserts in his study of the pathogenesis of modern society, crisis and critique collude to undermine stability⁴: crisis is change catching us unprepared, whereas critique is the way in which we endeavor to initiate change.⁵

This is not the whole story, however, or not the only one. Arendt claims that a crisis may liberate us from our prejudices, but in another passage she also relates it to a breakdown of what she calls “sound human reason” (Arendt 1977, 178), a phrase with more positive connotations than the term “prejudice.” In a formulation that echoes her earlier reflections on prejudice, Arendt even talks of a “disappearance of common sense” as a symptom of crisis (178). It might seem that common sense is merely a more respectable name for our repertoire of stereotypical conceptions, but the emerging paradox cannot be so easily neutralized. The disappearance of common sense, Arendt claims, is “the surest sign of the present-day crisis. In every crisis a piece of the world, something common to us all, is destroyed. The failure of common sense, like a divining rod, points to the place where such a cave-in has occurred” (178). In this quotation, a crisis really is an emergency. We are still in the same essay, but the metaphor has shifted: no essence is laid bare with the “disappearance of common sense”; what it leaves is simply a cave-in, the ruins after a collapse.⁶ The world, understood as the territory we share with each other and the reference point for all our communication, is fragmenting before us.

This dual determination of crisis as the disappearance of prejudices *and* the erosion of common sense indicates its ambivalent status in Arendt’s thought. The prejudices that are undermined in a crisis stand as a name for institutionalized and habituated attitudes that allow humans to cooperate and to understand new situations in terms of self-evident and shared rules and routines.⁷ In a manuscript on the significance of politics entitled “What Is Politics?,” Arendt contends that a complete lack of prejudices would demand an impossible constant alertness, a continual and strenuous cognitive labor.⁸ The perpetual engagement of our minds would soon leave us exhausted. Arendt does not simply disparage prejudices as rigid obstacles to genuine thought but recognizes their vital importance: they regulate our exposure to the world.⁹

Common sense is a related but more complex concept. To begin with, it denotes a tacit understanding of what is probable in more or less standard sit-

uations, an acquaintance with the normal mechanisms of the world, or a certain sense of what can be expected given established routines and previous experience.¹⁰ As a name for an instrument of orientation in a series of similar situations, it does look very much like a prejudice, but Arendt at times also hints at a more suggestive and layered characterization of the concept. Common sense is not only viewed as a set of internalized rules of thumb that allows for swift interpretation of shifting circumstances.¹¹ Rather, as separate from the individual senses (sight, touch, taste), it adds nothing to perceptions other than the all-important sense that others would perceive things in a like manner, an assumption grounded in the notion of a shared human cognitive constitution.¹² To put it concisely, common sense involves the sense that we have something in common with others. This explains why Arendt can contend that the loss of common sense is tantamount to the gradual destruction of a common world. That a “piece of the world” caves in does not mean that a given terrain of objects suddenly dissolves before our eyes. What is lost is rather the shared assurance that others would relate to this world in a similar way. This loss hollows out the idea that my impressions are in principle communicable and will at least potentially be ratified. Stripped of the confidence one derives from the anticipated, possible corroboration by others, orientation becomes difficult if not impossible. Without even the prospect of some confirmation from others (that may or may not be forthcoming but that nonetheless is possible in principle), we lose certainty about our navigational ability.

Against the backdrop of her description of common sense, however abbreviated and enigmatic it may be, the difference between the two terms—prejudice and common sense—comes into sharper focus. To follow Arendt in her diagnoses of decline, this difference is highlighted by the divergent but not mutually exclusive consequences of their respective disappearance. The loss of prejudices entails a perceptual inundation of our minds because we are stripped of ready categories for experience. The loss of common sense, on the other hand, makes us utterly lonely, for it is the loss of a sense of sharing the world with others.

What is a crisis? The crisis evidently has a double character. It forces us to ask fundamental questions and demands fresh attention to matters previously passed by. In this way, the crisis makes possible a review of the history and guiding principle of an activity or area, such as authority or education. At the same time, a crisis is a moment of danger and loss, since it entails the erosion of what we have in common or the loss of the very notion of the common, and, therefore, threatens the framework in which any exchange about some laid-bare ground or shared principle could take place.¹³ A crisis throws us back upon ourselves and isolates us from others. This does not sim-

ply mean that communication becomes more difficult: it rather destroys the ground for any future interaction at all. The crisis can trigger an exercise in political thought, but it also threatens to rob this exercise of its foundation, since politics concerns not individuals in their isolation but the relationship of men and women to each other.

Two Narratives of Crisis

In presenting two definitions of crisis without explicitly bridging them, Arendt confronts us with a peculiar juxtaposition of narratives. The first story is critical, directed against any calcified stereotypes or orthodoxies. We can discern a destructive impulse in Arendt's work, a will to conquer forgotten questions hidden under multiple layers of preconceptions.¹⁴ Much like her teacher Heidegger, she seeks to restore the validity and integrity of a particular philosophical experience.¹⁵ The other narrative is seemingly nostalgic, in that it comments on the gradual loss of world: the crisis is a withering away. These two stories can be found within one and the same essay without being overtly related to one another. Crisis is Arendt's concept for the liberation from prejudice *and* an estrangement from others, and she does not address this double use directly and openly.

The duality in "The Crisis of Education" is not a peculiar contradiction that can be overlooked because of its singular occurrence. In another essay entitled "What is Authority?," Arendt invokes a hypothetical agreement about the notion that modernity has been accompanied by a "constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority" (Arendt 1977, 91). As in all crises, this means that we can no longer "fall back upon authentic and indisputable experiences common to us all" and that the term itself has become "clouded by controversy and confusion" (91). Yet it is precisely when we can no longer presuppose a stock of shared experiences of authority and are robbed of a piece of world that we feel compelled to pose the question of the meaning of the concept: "it is my contention," Arendt writes, "that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question [what is authority?] because authority has vanished from the modern world" (91).

What follows this announcement of crisis is a journey through the historical meanings of authority. Along the way, Plato and Aristotle, the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, and finally the revolutions of the modern period, represent distinct conditions, each embodying a specific understanding and deployment of authority. The review of this complex, multi-layered entity is not carried out for the purpose of reinstatement, but the work of intellectual reconstruction is at the same time a work of liberation: Arendt both retrieves and dismantles a tradition comprised of bodies of thought and institutional practices to make us aware of a condition in which we are "con-

fronted anew . . . by the elementary problems of human living-together” without the trust in and protection of institutions and standards of behavior (Arendt 1977, 141). The essay, “What Is Authority?,” is thus not a learned article that lovingly uncovers the past to save it from imminent forgetting but rather an attempt to understand the exhaustion of the tradition and then also to grasp that moment as a possibility for confronting the problem of living together, which is the fundamental problem of politics.

In fact, the traditional and once self-evident norms of action that Arendt discusses all involve an escape from the political sphere defined as a zone where the order of human life is in contention. The stations she revisits constitute so many attempts to control and contain the political rather than realize it. Authority—this is its constitutive character—always demands obedience by subjects and citizens, and the source of its legitimacy is in all cases a power that transcends the political space. In Plato’s philosophy, Arendt claims, this external source is the ideas, which the philosopher alone discerns and which he then can represent as yardsticks or patterns for human conduct.¹⁶ The philosopher asserts his privileged contact with the world of ideas and translates them into a set of absolute norms in order to stifle the volatile plurality of claims and opinions in the *polis*. Arendt, therefore, claims that men only become political in the moment they move beyond the rule of transcendent authorities. Politics is constituted by the unpredictable polemical play of differentiated positions, and it subsides with the silent submission of all subjects under an indisputable truth, whose medium is the philosopher. We might say, “truth is the ultimate conversation stopper” (Fuller 2005, 51).

At the same time, Arendt admits that the disappearance of authorities represents a threat to a shared stock of experiences and the societal stability that it supports. In the wake of the breakdown of traditional authorities in the modern era, movements spring up that offer release from the resulting disorientation by means of pseudo-logical political doctrines and new forms of membership and belonging. Arendt writes that the “crisis [of authority], apparent since the inception of the century, is political in origin and nature” and makes room for the rise of “political movements intent upon replacing the party system” and the “development of a new totalitarian form of government” (Arendt 1977, 91). When old social hierarchies crumble and lose their binding force, the released “masses” can be reorganized into other societal formations by the consistent use of ideology and terror, a process Arendt describes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. If Plato wanted to secure order and obedience through the reign of ideas over the polis, totalitarianism moves further and endeavors to eliminate completely the plurality particular to the human community.

Arendt may welcome the decline of authority and its powers of prescription as the emancipation of politics from transcendent sources of absolute rules: in accordance with her vision of the autonomy and integrity of politics, genuine political activity only flares up when dominant social and philosophical authorities have been subverted, but this vision is combined with a historical perspective that identifies the crisis of old authorities as the backdrop to the massive destabilizations of the twentieth century: the authority vacuum becomes an opportunity to reconfigure society from above. The crisis of authority begins to resemble an absolutely fatal breakdown. The central question is, therefore, not only how we are supposed to approach the problem of “human living-together” (Arendt 1977, 156) once again or even for the first time, relieved of traditional norms. The question is how we can do so without the support of authentic and indisputable experiences “common to all,” experiences that safeguard subjects from total disorientation and hence new (and worse) forms of political subordination (101). This is, ultimately, the question that emerges in the moment of crisis: what community or form of “human living-together” is possible when its (potential) members no longer have anything in common?

At this point, we can also begin to see how entangled Arendt’s own thinking is with the notion of a massive crisis affecting society as a whole and even pushing it into total disaster. Indeed, her examinations of the history and covered-over conceptual structure of traditions almost seems complicit with the upheavals of the twentieth century, for her historical-analytical labor emerges from crisis that renders prejudices inadequate, holds on to it as an opportunity for reflection, and perhaps even moves towards it insofar as it identifies and scrutinizes sets of prejudices. Crisis is presented as the enabling condition for her historical investigations and the precondition for violent rule.¹⁷ Again, critique seems related to crisis in a fundamental way, an affiliation that lies behind anxious conservative indictments of critical theory from the Enlightenment and beyond.¹⁸ Since Arendt embeds different and even seemingly contradictory narratives in her essays, approaching crisis both as the moment where politics must begin and cannot begin, she cannot be accused of ignorance on this point. The question remains, however, how she herself responds to the question that emerges from her essays, namely the question of a community of people with nothing in common.

The Deus Ex Machina of Judgment

To reiterate the central argument so far: a crisis in Arendt’s sense cannot simply be welcomed as an occasion to review crucial political concepts or issues, for it also threatens to weaken or cut the bonds between men and hence cancel out any possibility of politics. In light of this danger, the crisis

requires a response that not only addresses the essence of whatever has been laid bare with the disappearance of a prejudice, but must also confirm that some common ground remains despite the loss of generally accepted, standard answers. The reaction to the crisis must in other words include an integrative force that lies beyond any shared traditional standards embraced by all members of the community.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Arendt devoted much energy to a theory of judgment, and the editor of her posthumously published lectures on Kant speaks of the existence of an unfinished treatise on this topic.¹⁹ This incomplete but still extremely significant project has even been hailed as one of her most enduring contributions. It seems to have many sources and motivations. It is an extension of her philosophical studies evident in the published lectures series, *The Life of the Mind*, where she analyzes the specificity of willing and thinking. Or it is a response to the confrontation with Adolf Eichmann, a man incapable of independently reflecting on and evaluating the obligations imposed on him by authority. In the context of the present reconstruction of parallel narratives of *Between Past and Future*, however, I would like to suggest that judgment also works as a response to the peculiarly dual character of crisis.

A look at intellectual history assures us that crisis and judgment belong together. There is, of course, the documented etymological connectedness of crisis and judgment; the Greek *krinein*, from which crisis is derived, means to separate, decide, and judge.²⁰ It is not hard, however, to imagine the relation of the two concepts in more vivid ways. In the medical and military terminology of antiquity, crisis referred to the turning point or crucial moment in which everything is at stake. In a crisis, matters of life and death, victory and defeat, are yet to be decided; a process, whether a disease or a military battle, is in a particularly sensitive, particularly significant phase that will either lead to a dramatic improvement or an equally dramatic deterioration.²¹ In this situation, nothing is more important than alertness, presence of mind, and responsiveness to particular conditions, in short, the ability to make the appropriate judgment.

Possibly drawing on this tradition, in which crisis is the term for an ambivalent, precarious instant demanding a fitting response,²² Arendt puts the concept of judgment to work in a way that matches the problem of politics, as this problem becomes manifest in the twin storylines of *Between Past and Future*. To begin with, judgment fills out the vacancy left by disappearing prejudices. Typically, a judgment is an operation whereby a particular is subsumed under an accepted standard or general rule. Prejudices are, in this context, a kind of routinized operation of pseudo-judgment, in the sense that standards or rules are continually being applied to a series of particulars with-

out much review of the adequacy of the one to the other. The prejudiced grasps the given particular as yet another embodiment of an already well-known phenomenon; he can be described as epistemologically stingy in that he refuses to pay attention and adjust already-formed concepts to the world. When Arendt speaks of judgment, however, she does not necessarily call for a swift and supple change of standards, whereby obsolete rules are replaced by updated ones. The required judgment is instead a reflective one, a judgment that generates its principles through its activity of relating to particulars rather than subsuming it under a preformed rule. A judgment is reflective, Kant explains, when the particular is given, and the universal has to be found for it.²³ It is precisely when the “yardsticks of judgment” defined as the self-evident rules or the generally accepted and unquestioned standards disappear that judging truly comes into view as an independent activity (Beiner 1982, 96).

But if judgment can replace prejudice (because the latter is nothing but a fossilized version of the former), it must also remedy the dissolution of a common world. According to Arendt, it does. Her reasoning relies quite explicitly on Kant’s inquiry into the possible validity of judgments of taste.²⁴ Such judgments, Arendt states in her essay on the “Crisis in Culture,” do not compel agreement in the same way as “demonstrable facts or truth proved by argument”; they lack the advantages of logic (Arendt 1977, 222). The specific validity of any judgment of taste instead derives from the “potential agreement of others” who would judge similarly, were they to find themselves in a similar situation (220). Not endowed with an irrefutable universal validity but nonetheless refusing to remain absolutely idiosyncratic, the judgment of taste is always made in “anticipated communication with others” and therefore depends on the possibility of imagining their presence (220–21).

Such reliance on the potential community of judging persons is only possible, however, because the judgment of taste is an “estimation of an object or mode of representation apart from any interest” (Caygill 1989, 321). The judging person may count on the potential agreement of all men and women capable of judging, because in turning towards the appearances of the world before them and taking pleasure in them rather than hunting for suitable and already known objects of consumption, they have temporarily extricated themselves from the needs of their ego. Thus liberated from the “limitations” of a desiring being as well as the scarcity of resources (Arendt 1977, 220), they can regard something from the viewpoint of others with similar cognitive abilities. Unlike the pursuit of private interest, which may spur the individual to compete or collaborate with others depending on the conditions, judging is an activity through which “sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass” (221).

Leaning on Kant's investigation of the transcendental conditions of the judgment of taste, Arendt is able to present judgment as an activity that is both released by and provides an antidote to crisis. When prejudices appear inadequate to an erupting situation, and a community turns into a mass of uncomprehending individuals no longer connected by their shared dependence on established standards, the operation of judgment seems to supply the perfect response. First, judging becomes visible as an independent and spontaneous mental process only when it is absolved from the labor of subsuming particulars under preformed measures or when it is robbed of the support of prior rules. Second, its activity presumes the "presence of others," for it consists of nothing else than the attempt to enlarge one's mind to encompass possible viewpoints in order to secure a "certain specific validity" (Arendt 1977, 221). When a community integrated by shared values or standards threatens to fall apart and the recognizable world seems to slip away, a degree of human interconnection reappears as an inherent dimension of judgment, an activity that presupposes the existence of others with similar cognitive make-up and therefore seems to be a way of re-establishing at least the promise of a shared reality by means of the free exercise of man's faculties.

Reviewing her theory of judgment as it is formulated in *Between Past and Future*, we can see that, for Arendt, attention to the world and appreciation of the perspectives of others coincide in the act of judgment. Without prejudices and hence without the socio-epistemic comfort and complacency they entail, we are awakened to a world of unknown things and unpredictable events as well as the plurality of men and women trying to understand a rapidly changing habitat. In fact, it is only when we lose our grip on the cognitive tools of prejudice that we are forced to consider in a more genuine way the presence of others and accommodate their views in an "enlarged mentality" (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*)" (Arendt 1977, 220).²⁵ Prejudices may seem to bring us together insofar as they are a collective phenomenon, but in fact they make everyone less mindful of the existence of others. Nor do we associate only because basic bodily needs and desires compel us to do so. According to Arendt, we depend on each other at the level of cognition: we perceive the world in concert, or we do not perceive it at all.

In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt combines a diagnosis of the crises of authority, education, and culture with elements of Kantian philosophy to point to the possibility of politics or "human living-together" in a post-traditional society. The person who makes a judgment, she claims, does not do so as a loner. Rather, to judge means to put oneself in the place of others and hope for the possible convergence of multiple perspectives. This does not mean that the judging person can count on unanimity: citing Kant, Arendt

makes clear that he can in fact only “woo the consent of everyone else” and wish for an eventual agreement (Arendt 1977, 222). Wooing denotes a rhetorical rather than logical procedure, a method of persuasion or even seduction that becomes necessary when discussions and disputes cannot be laid to rest by reference to the transparency of the self-evident.²⁶

Arendt’s appropriation of judgment does not imply a full return to the prejudices and the common sense lethally beset by crisis but rather forces a departure from all groups whose stability and cohesion are guaranteed by an inventory of preset values and views. The community that is the horizon of judgment cannot be taken for granted, because the transcendental conditions of the possibility of judgments of taste do not imply a sanction for any particular statement, which then could coagulate into a new fixed rule. When judging, a person’s mind stretches out for the potential agreement of others and makes a claim to validity on the basis of a promise of community. This claim is only the invocation of the possibility of communication among men and women with similar cognitive powers and does not represent a confident announcement of a truth accepted by all. The community remains something to be wooed in chronically open-ended negotiations about the character of the world. The commitment to community among fellow men that these imagined negotiations presuppose can in fact never come to rest in realized agreement: “As soon as it sees itself solidifying, as reflected in a received opinion, this community [of the judgment of taste] breaks up, some denouncing the received opinion as a cliché, others maintaining its acuity and expressiveness” (Phillips 2008, 99). What emerges in a crisis, then, is “solidarity without solidity” (Phillips 2008, 99).

Conclusion

The person who makes a judgment in a moment of crisis can legitimately hope for agreement but not presuppose actual consent, and the potentiality for community that appears in judgment cannot be converted into a new, stable collective identity anchored in generally accepted statements about the world. To occupy oneself with politics, which is only possible among a plurality of men and women, is to dive into a crisis, in which the extant rules by which groups separate themselves from others have become fragile. A community that practices politics is a community in crisis, neither definitely cohering nor definitely splitting up. This is, I believe, a central insight in Arendt’s work of some value in the contemporary moment. Groups that enjoy a spirit of warmth and togetherness and are inspired by a sense of a shared tradition and mission are not necessarily political communities. They are not even more successful at being a community than societies that appear to be more conflict-ridden and confused. In fact, genuine

political community formation comes about through the experience of citizens “passing through and somehow managing and tending (*hegen*) a variety of conflicts” (Hirschman 1995, 235). Demands for loyalty, shared values, and other kinds of communal thickness mean the end of political interaction, as Arendt understands it.

But *Between Past and Future* does not just describe a crisis as a moment at which fundamental questions emerge at the cost of fragmentation; the collection is itself involved in or enacts this moment. Its concealed but structuring concern with the character of crisis points to the problem of forming a community among people who have lost what they had in common and cannot fall back upon their collective memory. The very development that allows for politics, defined as the discourse on human living-together, also hollows out the sense that such living-together takes place at all. It is Arendt’s hope that the exercise of judgment can generate responses to questions for which we have no ready answers as well as remind us of each other, and in this way, making judgments is a form of crisis management. At the same time, Arendt’s theory of judgment is an attempt to find a way out of an impasse, namely the impasse of politics, an activity that seems to come into its own only when it becomes impossible. Judgment is the only answer to the situation of crisis, and Arendt’s theory of judgment is itself a response to a question to which she, at least for the moment, had no ready answer. Judgment is brought into *Between Past and Future* as a way to reconstitute a human community at the point of dissolution, and to hold together a work about to disintegrate into discrete and contradictory narratives.

Skeptical readers of Arendt frequently point to her nostalgia for the Greek polis and her indifference to pressing issues such as the societal distribution of wealth and stigmatized social identities. Her absorption of crisis into the very structure of her text, however, implies that she possesses a distinctively modern sensibility. For her as for many other thinkers of modernity, crises are forever impending. Even if Arendt’s tone is strangely calm, her essays accept without any discussion the premise that contemporary society finds itself in a perpetual state of alarm. (Of course, she may simply want to exploit the pre-existing discourse of the crisis-nature of the modern period in order to present more persuasively the case for political action.) This view of the exigencies of the moment is inscribed in the title of her collection: the past and the future drift away from each other, and previous experiences cannot be translated into reasonable expectations. This leaves the community in a gap, an in-between that can turn out to be either catastrophic or regenerative, depending on whether judgments emerge in the ruptures of time.²⁷ Arendt celebrates politics as a truly autonomous collective practice while discerning the dangers of such autonomy. An image from the preface to *Between*

Past and Future captures the precariousness of political action: we are, Arendt writes, “sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum” (Arendt 1977, 3).

Notes

¹ For instance, the discourse of a “legitimation crisis” in modern societies has become an object of scholarly and philosophical review rather than a source of urgent theoretical interest. Contemporary political theorists such as Wendy Brown and William Connolly have recently returned to Habermas’s *Legitimation Crisis* from 1973 and its argument for a “social science of crisis,” but they survey and translate his thought rather than debate him (Brown 2008).

² I am most grateful to Barbara Hahn for introducing me to Hannah Arendt as a thinker and writer.

³ See for instance Agamben’s essay “We Refugees.” The title of Agamben’s article is a reference to an article by Hannah Arendt published in 1943.

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck’s study is entitled *Crisis and Critique*. For the structural rather than merely incidental relationship of the two concepts, see especially the final chapter with its discussion of Rousseau (1973, 144–5).

⁵ According to Lauren Berlant, the figure of a crisis satisfies our need for images of heroism, and in this way it is affiliated with an agent-centered conception of critique: “this deployment of crisis . . . aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event because as a structural and predictable condition it has not engendered the kind of historic action that we associate with the heroic agency a crisis seems already to have called for” (2007, 760).

⁶ For a recent analysis of Arendt’s metaphorical thinking as an enacted defense against the mercilessly logical idea chains or ideo-logies of totalitarianism, see Martin Blumenthal-Barby’s interpretation of the (literary) style in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2009).

⁷ James March and Johan Olsen define institutions as bundles of routines that make it possible to coordinate activities, help avoid conflicts, and mitigate unpredictability (1989, 24).

⁸ Ursula Ludz has gathered and edited a series of linked manuscripts on the question of politics in a collection *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*. One of the fragments has the rubric “Prejudices [Die Vorurteile]” (1993, 17–27).

⁹ Arendt shares this insight into the pragmatic value of pre-formed views with, for instance, the German sociologist Arnold Gehlen who was her contemporary. Gehlen hypothesized that the modern combination of greater access to information flows and relative erosion of traditional conceptions of the world would induce cognitive stress (1957, 45–49). For a critical engagement with the Enlightenment rejection of prejudices as a form of heteronomy—a rejection that Arendt with her Kantian affiliation seems to perform in *Between Past and Future*—see Hans Georg Gadamer (1960, 255–61).

¹⁰ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt speaks of common sense as a “measured insight into the interdependence of the arbitrary and the planned, the acci-

dental and the necessary” (1958, 352). She seems to be saying that, for the commonsensical person the course of the world is never entirely predictable, but the particularities of the situation, the accidental and the arbitrary, still remain within the orbit of the manageable. Common sense works as a guide because circumstances are rarely totally and utterly alien and can be placed on some hypothetical continuum between the familiar and the strange.

¹¹ In § 40 of the third *Critique*, Kant draws a distinction between sound understanding [“der gesunde Verstand”] and *sensus communis* (2001, 176): the latter, he claims, truly deserves the epithet sense [“Sinne”] since it involves a sense of pleasure (2001, 177).

¹² Without necessarily fleshing it out in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt relies on an (Aristotelian) tradition in which the individual senses require coordination to allow for complex sensations, that is, sensations of things that have many qualities such as bright, smooth, and sweet (Heller-Roazen 2008, 32-36). Yet the accord of our five senses with one another, without which no objects would appear to us in their complexity, can be attributed to all: we can legitimately assume that others enjoy an alignment and unification of their diverse powers. Arendt may draw this from § 39 in Kant’s third *Critique*, in which the legitimate attribution of taste and sound understanding to everyone rests on the presupposition of the proportion of cognitive faculties shared by all [“Proportion dieser Erkenntnisvermögen”] (2001, 173).

¹³ Since Jean-François Lyotard’s interventions, we have become accustomed to celebrations of the existence of multiple and incommensurate discourses, none of which can claim to be common to all. It should probably be noted that the mere observation of “heteromorphous” language games presupposes a position from which they can appear incommensurate (Lyotard 1984, 65). This position would then transcend all discourses.

¹⁴ In his study of the common ground between Heidegger and Arendt, Jacques Taminiaux writes of Arendt’s desire to extract phenomena from “a layer of ossified theses that amalgamate what should be distinguished” (1997, 140).

¹⁵ Heidegger articulates his notion of the positivity of destruction in *Sein und Zeit* (1953, 19-27).

¹⁶ Dana Villa outlines what he calls Arendt’s “postauthoritarian concept of politics” in *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (1995, 158).

¹⁷ Steve Buckler notes this but does not ground his claims in an analysis of specific textual passages in Arendt’s work: “The experience of totalitarianism was, on Arendt’s view, a crystallization of key tendencies within modernity: it ‘brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought.’ This crisis offers at the same time an opportunity to look back and to reconsider aspects of our experience with eyes unclouded by the tradition that has now been lost” (2001, 621).

¹⁸ Reinhart Koselleck’s polemical study of how critique and crisis combine to dissolve political order in the age of Enlightenment stands as an example of this conservative apprehension (1973, 132-57).

¹⁹ This is the thesis of the editor of Arendt’s Kant lectures, Ronald Beiner (1982, 119-20).

²⁰ For the etymology of “crisis,” see Koselleck’s encyclopedia article on the concept including its legal and medical contexts (1976, 1235).

²¹ See Koselleck’s encyclopedia entry (1976, 1235–236).

²² For a treatment of lack of time [“Zeitnot”] as constitutive of crisis, see Koselleck’s essay on the conceptual history [“Begriffsgeschichte”] of this notion (2006, 213).

²³ Kant makes this distinction in the introduction to the third *Critique* under the heading “Von der Urteilskraft als einem a priori gesetzgebenden Vermögen” (2001, 19).

²⁴ Arendt’s appropriation of Kant’s third *Critique* has earned her much criticism. George Kateb writes that Arendt seeks to renew political thought in a manner that aestheticizes politics: “Arendt sets out to transform, to the fullest degree possible, political phenomena into aesthetic phenomena” (1999, 133). For a defense of this alignment of political and aesthetic judgment, see Linda M. G. Zerilli (2005, 158–88).

²⁵ Arendt here quotes Kant’s third *Critique* § 40 where he distinguishes among the maxims of common human understanding: to think for oneself, to think from the standpoint of everyone else, and to think consistently (2001, 176).

²⁶ On the basis of the anthropological definition of man as the incomplete animal, Hans Blumenberg contends that rhetoric—the endeavor to secure, maintain, and exploit “agreements [Übereinstimmungen]”—allows for cooperation among human agents in the absence of other mechanisms, such as instincts (1981, 108).

²⁷ April Flakne develops a congruent view in an essay on Arendt entitled “No longer and Not Yet”: judgment is, according to Flakne, the faculty for “confronting and maintaining a sudden disjuncture in time” (1999, 157).

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