

Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy

Hannah Arendt

WE WERE TALKING ABOUT the clash between the spectator and the actor. The spectacle before the spectator—enacted, as it were, for his judgment—is history as a whole, and the true hero of this spectacle is mankind in the "series of generations proceeding" into some "infinity." This process has no end, the "destination of the human race is perpetual progress." In this process the capabilities of the human species are actualized, developed to "the highest pitch"—except that a highest one, in an absolute sense, does not exist. The ultimate destination, in the sense of eschatology, does not exist, but the two chief aims by which this progress is guided, though behind the backs of the actors, is freedom in its simple and elementary sense that no one rules over his fellow men—and peace between nations as the condition for the unity of the human race. Perpetual progress toward freedom and peace, the latter guaranteeing free intercourse between all nations on the earth, these are the ideas of reason, without which the mere story of history would not make sense. It is the whole that gives meaning to the particulars if they are seen and judged by men endowed with reason. Men, though they are natural creatures and part of nature, transcended nature by virtue of a reason that asks: What is the purpose of nature? By producing one species with a faculty for asking such questions, nature has produced its own master. The human species is distinguished from all animal species not merely by its possession of speech and reason but because its faculties are capable of indeterminate development.

By now we have discussed the spectator in the singular, as Kant himself often does, and with good reason. First, there is the simple fact that one onlooker can behold many actors, who together offer the spectacle that unfolds before his eyes. Second, there is the whole weight of tradition, according to which the contemplative way of life presupposes withdrawal from the noisy, contingencies of the world, as it were, because contemplation in a solitary, untroubled, quiet, can be carried on in solitude. You remember that, in the Parable of the Cave, Plato says that its inhabitants, the many, who watch the shadow-play on the screen in front of them, are "chained by the legs and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads"; hence they cannot communicate with one another about what they see. It is not only the philosopher returning from the light of the day of Ideas who is a completely isolated figure. The spectators in the cave are also isolated, one from the other. Actors, on the other hand, never possible in solitude or isolation; one man alone needs, at the very least, the help of others in every thought whatever his enterprise may be. When the distinction between the two ways of life, the political (active) way and the philosophical (contemplative) way, is so contrasted as to render them mutually exclusive—as it is, for instance, in Plato's political philosophy—one gets an absolute distinction between the one who knows what is best to do and the others who, following his guidance or his commands, will carry it through. This is the role of Plato's Statesman, the ideal ruler (an *archon*) does not act at all; he is the wise man who begins and knows the intended end of an action and therefore is the ruler. Hence, it would be entirely superfluous and even harmful for him to make his intentions known. We know that for Kant, on the contrary, publicity is the "transcendental principle" that should rule all action. What ever act "stands in the need of publicity" in order not to be false to one's purpose, one will remember, an act that combines politics and right. Kant cannot have the same notion as Plato about acting and mere judging or contemplating or knowing.

If you ask yourself where and who this public is that would give publicity to the intended act to begin with, it is quite obvious that in Kant's case it cannot be a public of actors or participants in government. The public he is thinking of is, of course, the reading public, and it is the weight of their opinion he is appealing to, not the weight of their votes. In the Prussia of the last decades of the eighteenth century—that is, a country on the eve of an absolute monarch, advised by a rather enlightened bureaucracy of civil servants, who, like the monarch, were completely separated from "the subjects"—there could be no truly public realm other than this reading and writing public. What was secret and unapproachable by definition was precisely the realm of government and administration. And if you read the essays from which I have quoted here, it should be clear that Kant could conceive of action only as acts of the powers—that is, whatever they might happen to be—that is, governmental acts; any actual action from the side of the subjects could consist only in conspiratorial activity, the acts and plots of secret societies. In other words, the alternative to established government is, for him, not revolution but a coup d'état. And a coup d'état, in contrast to a revolution, must indeed be prepared in secrecy, whereas revolutionary groups or parties have always been eager to make their goals public, and in really important sections of the population to their cause. Whether or not this strategy has ever brought about a revolution is another matter. But it is important to understand that Kant's condemnation of revolutionary action rests on a misunderstanding, because he conceives of it in terms of a coup d'état.

We are used to thinking about the difference between contemplation and action in terms of the relation between theory and practice, and though it is true that Kant says as much on this matter, "In the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice,'" it is also true, and is best demonstrated by that essay, that he did not understand the issue as we understand it. Kant's notion of practice is determined by Practical Reason and the Critique of Practical Reason, which deals with neither judgment nor action, tells you all about it. Judgment, arising out of "contemplative pleasure" and "aesthetic delight," has no place in it. In practical matters, not judgment but will is decisive, and this will simply follows the maxims of Reason. Even in the Critique of Pure Reason Kant starts his discussion of the "Pure Employment of Reason" with its practical implications, although he then provisionally "sets aside practical i.e., moral ideas to consider reason only in its speculative... employment." This speculation concerns the ultimate destination of the individual, the ultimate of "the most sublime questions." Practical means moral in Kant, and it concerns the individual qua individual. In true opposite would be, not theory, but speculation—the speculative use of reason. Kant's actual theory in political affairs was the theory of perpetual progress and a federal union of the nations in order to give the idea of mankind a political reality. Whoever worked in this direction was welcome. But these ideas, with whose help he reflected on human affairs in general, are very different from the "wildful participation bordering on enthusiasm" that caught the spectators of the French Revolution and "the exaltation [of] the diminished public" looking on in sympathy "without the least intention of assisting." In his opinion, it was precisely this sympathy that made the revolution a "shameless... act to be forgotten"—i.e., in other words, that made it a public event of world-historical significance. Hence, what constituted the appropriate public realm for this particular event were not the actors but the acclaiming spectators.

Since Kant did not write his political philosophy, the best way to find out what he thought about this matter is to turn to his "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," where, in discussing the production of art works in their relation to taste, which judges and decides about them, he confronts an analogous problem. We— for reasons we need not go into—are inclined to think that in order to judge a spectacle you must first have the spectacle—that the spectator is secondary to the actor; we tend to forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it. Kant is convinced that the world without man would be a desert, and a world without man means to him, without spectators. In his discussion of aesthetic judgment, Kant makes a distinction between genius and taste. Genius is required for the production of art works, while, for judging them, for deciding whether or not they are beautiful objects, "no more" (we would say, but not Kant) is required than taste. "For judging of beautiful objects taste is required... for their production genius is required." Genius, according to Kant, is a matter of productive imagination and originality, taste a mere matter of judgment. He enters the question, which of the two is the "more noble" faculty—which is the conditioning question "to which one has to look in the judging of art as beautiful art"—assuming, of course, that most of the judges of beauty lack the faculty of productive imagination, which is called genius, but that the few who are endowed with genius do not lack the faculty of taste. And the answer is: Abundance and originality of ideas are less necessary to beauty than the accordance of the imagination in its freedom with the conformity to law of the understanding (which is called taste). For all the abundance of the former produces in lack of freedom (which is called taste); on the other hand, the judgment is the faculty by which it is adjusted to the understanding.

Taste, like the judgment in general, is the discipline (or training) of genius; it clips its wings, gives guidance;... brings clearness and order [into the thoughts of genius]; it makes the ideas susceptible of being permanently and generally assented to and capable of being followed by others, and of an ever progressing culture. If, then, in the conflict of these two properties in a product something must be sacrificed, it should be rather on the side of genius.

Kant allows this subordination of genius to taste even though without genius nothing for judgment to judge would exist. But Kant says explicitly that "the beautiful art... imagination, intellect, spirit, and taste are required," and he adds, in a note, that "the three former faculties are united by means of the fourth," that is, by taste—i.e., by judgment. Spirit, however—a special faculty apart from reason, intellect, and imagination—enables the genius to find an expression for the ideas "by means of which the subjective state of mind brought about by them... can be communicated to others." In other words, spirit—namely, that which inspires the genius and only has him as which "no science can teach and no industry can learn"—consists in expressing "the ineffable element in the state of mind (Gemüthsstand) that certain representations arouse in all of us but for which we have no words and would therefore be unable, without the help of genius, to communicate to one another; it is the proper task of genius to make this state of mind 'generally communicable.'" The faculty that guides this communicability is taste, and taste and judgment is to the privilege of genius. The condition also goes not for the existence of beautiful objects is communicability; the judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers. And this critic and spectator sits in every artist and fabricator; while not this critical, judging faculty the actor or maker would not even be perceived. Or, to put it another way, still in Kantian terms the very originality of the artist (or the very novelty of the actor) depends on his making himself understood by those who are not artists (or actors). And while one can speak of a genius in the singular because of his originality, one can never speak, as Pythagoras did, in the same way of the spectator. Spectators exist only in the plural. The spectator is not involved in the act, but he is always involved with fellow spectators. He does not share the faculty of genius, originality, with the maker or the faculty of novelty with the actor; the faculty they have in common is the faculty of judgment. As far as making is concerned, this insight at least as old as Latin (as distinguished from Greek) antiquity, we find it expressed for the first time in Cicero's *On the Orator*. For even though *discriminatio* [discriminatio], distinguishes between right and wrong in matters of art and proportion by some silent sense without any knowledge of art and proportion; and while they can do this in the case of pictures and statues, in other such works, for whose understanding nature has given them less equipment, they display this discrimination much more in judging the rhythms and pronunciations of words, since there are no words (infinit) in common sense, and of such things nature has willed that no one should be altogether unable to sense and experience them [perceptual]. And he goes on to notice that it is truly marvellous and remarkable how little difference there is between the learned and the ignorant in judging, while there is the greatest difference in making.

Kant, quite in the same vein, remarks in his *Aesthetics* that beauty consists in having but this common sense that enables us to judge as spectators; and the opposite of it is a sense private, a private sense, which he also calls "logical Egoism," implying that our logical faculty, the faculty that enables us to draw conclusions from premises, could indeed function without communication—except that then, namely, if humanity has caused the loss of common sense, it would lead to insane results precisely because it has separated itself from the experience that can be said and validated only in the presence of others. The most surprising aspect of this business is that common sense, the faculty of judgment and of discriminating between right and wrong, should be based on the sense of taste. Of our five senses, three clearly give us objects of the external world and therefore are easily communicable: sight, hearing, and touch deal directly and, as it were, objectively with objects; though these senses-objects are identifiable and can be shared with others—can be expressed in words, talked about, etc. Smell and taste give inner sensations that are entirely private and incommunicable what I taste and what I smell cannot be expressed in words at all. They seem to be private senses by definition. Moreover, the three objective senses have this in common: they are capable of representation, of making present something that is absent. I can, for example, recall a building, a melody, the touch of velvet. This faculty—which in Kant is called *Imaginatio*—is possessed by neither taste nor smell. On the other hand, they are quite clearly the discriminatory senses one can withhold judgment from what one sees and, though less easily, one can withhold judgment from what one hears or touches. But in matters of taste or smell, the pleasures or displeasures are immediate and overwhelming. Had pleasure as displeasure, again, are entirely ideosyncratic. Why then should taste—at beginning with Kant but ever since Gassendi—be elevated to and become the vehicle of the mental faculty of judgment? And judgment in turn—that is, not the judgment that is simply cognitive and resides in the senses that give us the objects we have in common with all living things that have the same sensual equipment, but judgment between right and wrong—why should this be based on this private sense? And I find that when it comes to matters of taste we are no longer able to communicate that we cannot even disagree about them? Do passions non disputandum esse. The relation to this is to its imagination, imagination, the ability to make present what is absent, transforms the objects of the objective senses into "sensed" objects, as though they were objects of an inner sense. This happens by reflecting not on an object but on its representation. The represented object now assumes one's pleasure or displeasure, not direct perception of the object. Kant calls this "the operation of reflection."