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RESPONSE TO THIELE

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The most difficult but also important task involved in responding to a critique of one's work is trying to understand what disturbs the critic most. Three aspects of my reading of Arendt on judgment seem to disturb Leslie Paul Thiele: (1) I do not pay attention to the role of "narrative encounters" in the formation of judgments, (2) I treat the whole practice of judgment as "a fickle product of imaginative fancy," and (3) I deprive judgment of any "moral import." I will try to respond to these criticisms in turn.

I agree with Thiele about the importance of narrative in Arendt's account of judgment. But the role played by narrative was not the concern of my essay. The concern was to foreground judgment as a practice of freedom and in this way to loosen the stranglehold that the validity problematic has on both our understanding of Arendt and much contemporary democratic political thinking. This problematic is definitive of, but in no way restricted to, the work of Jürgen Habermas and theorists of "deliberative democracy" such as Seyla Benhabib. Thiele says my criticism of Habermas may be fair, but I unfairly put Ronald Beiner in the same camp. That was not my intention. Professor Beiner was the one reader who noticed and emphasized the problem of freedom in Arendt's account of judgment. Deeply indebted to his reading, I am all the more puzzled that he would grant those aspects of Habermas's critique that turn on the question of validity.

Professor Thiele characterizes my project as an effort "to complete Arendt's unfinished theory of judgment." Demurring at such hubris, I would characterize it as an attempt to recover the thematic of freedom, which (as Beiner noted) originally inspired Arendt to raise the problem of judgment, and to clarify why that theory is so often accused of failing to answer to the question of validity. Habermas's perplexity about Arendt's "failure" to provide a cognitive foundation for politics struck me as curious but not entirely unexpected. It was the occasion to ask whether Arendt had explicated clearly

enough—or whether we had heard clearly enough—that what is at stake in the judging faculty is not—or not simply—the capacity to know that such and such is the case but to accord it a certain value. To accord value is to make things count in a certain way, to make sense of things or, as Arendt puts it, to “understand.” It is to come to terms, for example, with the past that can be neither forgotten nor changed. And here, narrative would indeed play a role, just as Thiele insists.

But to accord value is also to judge—say, a rose “beautiful,” a war “unjust,” or same-sex marriage “just”—apart from utility or function. Following Kant, Arendt was adamant on this point, but it has gotten lost in readings that take judgment to be a practice of “redeeming” truth claims, that is, ascertaining their validity (in cognitive terms). Worried about our tendency to hold judging to “standards of utility,” Arendt tried to redefine the idea of validity in noninstrumental, democratic political terms.¹ I can *know* that the rose is the reproductive organ of the plant, *know* that a war will cost thousands of lives (or generate thousands of jobs), *know* that same-sex couples with rights and benefits are (or are not) more “productive” members of society. These are familiar pro and con arguments. It is not as if I forget what I know when I judge reflectively, which is what many a perplexed reader would have Arendt say, but such knowledge belongs to means-ends thinking. If judging politically is a form of counting things differently, then counting same-sex marriage as part of the common world is not about tallying up the costs and benefits. Nor is it a matter of “agreeing that gay relationships occur,” as Thiele interprets me. In both cases we remain at the cognitive level, where the question turns only on whether same-sex relationships exist and serve some function or not. What we fail to accord value, in other words, is a claim to sexual freedom that exceeds the idiom of utility. That it is exceedingly difficult *not* to think about such judgments in terms of utility suggests, as Arendt time and again argued, that means-ends thinking is deeply ingrained in our understanding of politics. In her view, the price of such thinking is significant: we lose sight of freedom, the *raison d’être* of democratic politics.

One may well disagree with Arendt’s claim that (nonsovereign) freedom is the *raison d’être* of democratic politics. I do not and, if I read him correctly, neither does Professor Thiele. But if political judgment involves the exercise of freedom, he says, freedom should not be understood as imaginative license to judge as one pleases. This takes me to Thiele’s second criticism, namely, the importance I ascribe to productive imagination in a practice of reflective judgment. Foregrounding the creative role of imagination, my intention was not to endorse the aestheticization of politics, let alone “aestheticiz[e] Arendt,” as Thiele accuses, but to question the assumptions

that underwrite such a charge. I provocatively chose Jacques Rancière's claim, "There has never been any 'aestheticization' of politics because politics is aesthetic in principle," as one of my epigraphs. If politics is like aesthetics, so the charge goes, then political claims are no more objective than claims about the beautiful. This in turn assumes that claims about the beautiful are as subjective as claims about the agreeable. Thus, the claim, "This war is unjust" is, finally, as subjective as the claim, "I like canary wine" (to use Kant's example). I tried to explain why Arendt, following Kant's insight into the difference between the beautiful and the agreeable, could refute at once the idea that political claims are "merely subjective" and the notion that they can be proved. This yields a very distinctive notion of validity, what Kant called "subjective validity," which always makes reference to others and anticipates their agreement. I will not rehearse that argument here. Rather, I will focus on the place of productive imagination in any such claim.

"Zerilli writes, 'In free play, the imagination is no longer in the service of the application of concepts.'" Thiele agrees that imagination "is not encumbered by conceptual containers. But the unencumbered play of imagination is counterbalanced by the sober reflection that Arendt identifies as the actual activity of judging." According to Thiele, I (rather irresponsibly) reduce all of judging to the "free play" of the imagination. Whereas judging is a serious affair, imagining things anew is pure play. I find this puzzling. It is puzzling not only because I never say—nor do I think—that imagination is the whole of judgment but because Thiele persists in casting productive imagination as the other of "sober reflection," "narrative meaning," "common sense," and, ultimately (as Thiele cites Arendt), "the operation of reflection—the actual activity of judging something." But is productive imagination the playful other of all these serious things?

This way of thinking about imagination has a long philosophical tradition in which, as Cornelius Castoriadis argues, it is associated with the fictive, with what is "unreal." And this tradition, as Ernesto Grassi shows, denounces the imagination in the same way it denounces rhetoric. For rhetoric too supposedly impairs our ability to judge: it paints pleasing but unreal pictures that deceive our reason. Both Grassi and Castoriadis argue that the faculty of productive imagination is—as Aristotle first discovered and Kant, Heidegger, and Freud later affirmed—the basis for all judgment and all knowledge. Without the initial non-concept-guided synthesizing activity of imagination, there would be no concept formation, no objective knowledge, and thus no science. Kant's famous "recoil" (as Heidegger put it) from his discovery of the transcendental imagination (in the A-edition of the first *Critique*) is a characteristic gesture in the history of Western philosophy. According to Castoriadis,

philosophy has “use[d] the discovery of the second [reproductive] imaginative to cover up its discovery of the first [productive] imagination.”² Perhaps it is time to stop covering up the origin of our capacity to judge and begin to recognize that productive imagination, the capacity to see relations between things that have none (i.e., no necessary relations), is the condition of concept formation *tout court*; it lies at the foundation of all our thought—and also our freedom.

Indeed, there are not only philosophical or epistemological issues (concerning the origin of our knowledge) at stake in recognizing the constitutive role of productive imagination in our capacity to judge. There are also democratic political issues at stake. And this is especially the case when we are called upon to judge—as Arendt thinks we are once the thread of tradition is broken—without the mediation of a concept. In the third *Critique* Kant describes the freedom we feel when the imagination, freed from the charge of knowledge, is not bound to reproduce images in accordance with the law of the understanding, the faculty of concepts. Arendt too emphasizes judging without a concept as a practice of affirming freedom, though she said nothing about this productive aspect of imagination—not, I think, because she feared it in the way Thiele does. Whatever her reasons, Arendt’s account of judgment as a noncognitive activity is hard to grasp without an understanding of the productive power of imagination. The reproductive imagination is by definition in the service of the application of concepts to particulars, that is, of making determinant judgments. But the problem for Arendt was how to resist the temptation to subsume under a rule new objects and events for which we have no such rule but which call for our judgment. “The problem of the new,” as Arendt described it, concerns our tendency to occlude what is novel in such objects and events, that is, to find in them nothing more than a realization of antecedent causes, and thereby deny human freedom. This tendency pertains not only to the phenomenon of totalitarianism, which inspired Arendt’s account of judging, but also to new rights claims, such as the radical claim to sexual freedom that gets lost in most accounts of the right to gay marriage. In the former case, we assert the reemergence of familiar political forms such as tyranny; in the latter case, we assert the expansion of a political logic such as equality under law. Occluded in both cases is what is novel, that is, that which could not have been predicted or foretold, that which is not an actuality already given in the past as a potentiality but is instead the incalculable product of human action.

Surely there is a risk in the exercise of imagination, just as Thiele warns. But if imagination is the condition of judging, of seeking meaning for the consequences of human action and affirming freedom, then it may well be a

risk worth taking. Thiele too would affirm freedom, but he would rather not take that risk. Thus, he suggests taming the otherwise undisciplined faculty of imagination with exemplary narrative. Narrative keeps imagination under the control of more sober faculties such as common sense. (But what if common sense, as I, following Grassi, argued in my essay, is rooted in our capacity for imagination?) Narrative is important for Arendt, as I said above, but not necessarily in the way Thiele assumes. Narrative is important not for its sobering function but because it offers different ways of seeing the same object or event—it gives voice to plurality. And plurality, in Arendt's view, is what guarantees objectivity in a democratically significant sense, for it multiplies the perspectives from which an object is seen.³ The more perspectives from which an object is seen, she argues, the more reality it has. Narratives are judgments (made by some) that help shape our sense of what is real, but that also call for judgments (made by others). In this sense narratives offer meaningful frameworks for determining not only *that* something exists but *how* it exists for us, that is, making sense of things or trying to gain understanding.

But why cast narrative understanding with Thiele as providing “a moral compass”? Arendt's narrative account of the Eichmann trial offers a way to view events, but I very much doubt that she would have called it a moral compass. To doubt in this way is not to say that moral judgments are somehow irrelevant to politics. They matter very much “when the chips are down,” as Arendt once remarked. Rather, it is to think carefully about our tendency to conflate morality, which ostensibly concerns the care of others but actually, as Arendt argues, “concerns the individual in his singularity,” and politics, which is oriented toward care for the world. The point here is not to deny either the importance of morality for human existence or that Arendt ever spoke of judgment as “the ability to tell right from wrong.” Clearly, she did. But we should question the idea that to use the words “right” and “wrong” in the political realm is, in her view, the same as using them in the moral realm. We play different language games, as Wittgenstein would say, and the differences matter.

I thank Thiele for taking the time to comment on my essay.

NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture” in *In Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 197–226, 216. See also 215.

2. Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Discovery of the Imagination,” in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 213–245, 215.

3. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 57–58; Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1993), 96. I discuss this point in Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 140.

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