To choose one’s company: Arendt, Kant, and the Political Sixth Sense

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Abstract
This essay explores the phenomenon of common sense through a contextual analysis of Hannah Arendt’s political application of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. I begin by tracing the development of Arendt’s thinking on judgment and common sense during the 1950s which led her to turn to the third *Critique*. I then consider the justification of her move by examining the philosophical context and political applications of the third *Critique*, arguing that within it Kant made an original and profound discovery: that the phenomenon of common sense contains a hidden faculty that may anchor moral and political judgments. I conclude by arguing that Arendt was on firmer ground than is often thought in adapting Kantian common sense to politics, a fact that may afford new possibilities for the practice of moral and political thought.

Keywords
Arendt, Kant, Heidegger, common sense, judgment

Introduction
In this essay, I am interested in gaining clarity into the phenomenon of common sense. Traditionally associated with the virtue Aristotle called “prudence,” it has historically denoted a kind of worldly wisdom cultivated through natural insight, practical experience, and humanistic education. Though its colloquial status might lead us to believe its meaning is vacuous, the notion of common sense has been widely used in numerous languages both past and present, and nearly always conveys a similar phenomenon, historically taken seriously by philosophers and statesmen alike. Yet, two and half millennia after Aristotle the principles of common sense continue to remain largely mysterious. The judgment it denotes suggests that
its principles are not merely arbitrary and private, but if that is so what could be its criteria? What in the idea of common sense provides a basis for asserting that one individual’s judgment is superior to another’s? In this essay, I will argue that in her theory of judgment Hannah Arendt, through a circuitous route leading from Heidegger’s existentialist interpretation of Aristotelian *phronēsis* to Kantian aesthetics, provided arguably the best answer we have to this question.

This answer, however, is anchored in an initially strange proposition: that Kant should have applied the *Critique of Judgment* to moral and political questions. Given Kant’s architectonic philosophy, this is a provocative suggestion. It is perhaps all the more surprising, then, that the idea has received a remarkable amount of interest, an interest which in fact appears to be substantially increasing in recent years. Yet, despite this robust current literature, the need for further research and analysis is far from exhausted. With a few exceptions, such as to a certain extent Annelies Degryse’s piece, the centrality of the problem of common sense to Arendt’s work on judgment has not been sufficiently appreciated and explored. This, I will argue in the following, means that the central concern of her work on judgment is then largely missed. Secondly, the literature has generally adopting a textualist and analytic approach, focusing on a few key essays, and as a result, I believe there is potentially more concreteness and depth of understanding available by taking a more contextualist approach. Thus, in what follows I propose to place both Arendt and Kant within their respective ideological contexts, both of which were heavily focused on the puzzle of common sense. Such an approach can offer a number of insights. First, it shows that the possibility of applying Kantian aesthetics to political and moral questions is much less surprising than it might appear; indeed, the idea was almost certainly not lost on Kant himself. Secondly, it arguably resolves a longstanding *aporia* in accounts of practical reason, to wit, the unique validity of the principle of common sense. Finally, it shows the way in which Arendt understood her account of judgment to be her fundamental response to what she saw as the erosion of common sense in the Modern era.

The argument of this essay centres on an examination of the striking conjunction of Kant’s and Arendt’s concerns over the nature of judgment and common sense. Examining Arendt’s concerns first, I argue that her early attempts to theorise judgment led her to recognise a practical *aporia* in previous accounts of practical reason. She discovered that Kant offered a solution to that *aporia* in his aesthetics, a solution that could be applied to practical reason despite Kant’s own resistance to the idea. In order to validate Arendt’s position, I examine the philosophical context and argument of Kant’s *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, explaining the unique form of common sense-based validity it articulated. I argue that in his concept of enlarged mentality, Kant made a novel and profound discovery: that hidden within the prosaic phenomenon of common sense existed a faculty capable of transcending our personal interests and taking in the perspectives of other judges, and it is to this faculty we appeal when we make moral or political judgments. In the last portion of the essay, I consider past criticism of Arendt’s use of Kant, arguing that Kant scholarship increasingly supports her perspective.
Arendt and the problem of common sense

The challenge to studying Arendt’s thought often comes from its highly organic nature. This is especially the case with her account of judgment, which developed over a number of years during the 1950s. Arendt came to believe there was a fundamental problem in the initially Heideggerian account of judgment she had developed during the mid-fifties, involving the ambiguous role of common sense in practical reason. Unfortunately, she seems to have thought through this puzzle largely only within her thought process. Therefore, in this section I will use key passages from her thought journal to anchor a reconstruction of her thinking on the problem of common sense, though it will also be necessary to elaborate the meaning of those passages to some degree. First, however, I will need to consider the background of Arendt’s understanding of common sense.

Arendt is a uniquely valuable resource in any discussion of the modern political relevance of common sense: few modern thinkers have devoted so much sustained and multifaceted attention to its nature and political significance. Indeed, in many ways it was focal point of her work. The modern failure of common sense dominates The Origins of Totalitarianism, providing its central explanatory element. Though seemingly less prominent in The Human Condition, it was pivotal to its genealogy of modernity. The book’s culminating chapter analysed the modern political turn from common sense toward introspection and instrumental rationality, leading to a politics that prioritised labour, bureaucracy, and hyper-consumption. Arendt’s response to this situation occurs within her various writings on judgment, where she theorised the nature and validity of common sense. Whatever the context, her definition of common sense remained consistent: it was an intuitive feeling for worldliness, a “sixth sense…that fits us into, and thereby makes possible, a common world.”

This language is strikingly, if unsurprisingly, Aristotelian, linking together Aristotle’s two conceptions of common sense. Aristotle’s comments on common sense are sporadic and fragmentary, and reconstructing his account of it involves a certain degree of hermeneutic license. The first idea is koînê aîsthèsis. A highly subjectivist and psychological formulation, it posited that in order for the five senses to be useful, there must be some intuitive sixth sense that synthesises the data of our senses and fits it into experience, thus enabling us to practically engage with our environment. The second idea – found in the Rhetoric – he calls endoxa: an understanding of the implicitly shared opinions of one’s political community. While Aristotle never explicitly links endoxa with koînê aîsthèsis, David Summers argues that there are strong indications that they were. While Aristotle also never explicitly refers to either term in his discussion of practical reason in the Nicomachean Ethics, traditionally phronêsèsis was assumed to rely on both common senses. When Roman humanists considered the cultural training necessary to instill political judgment, they linked the two terms under the Latin word for koînê aîsthèsis: sensus communis. This practice continued in Renaissance era humanism, and went on to strongly influence eighteenth century common sense philosophers.

Arendt’s Aristotelian definition of common sense no doubt emerged from her philosophical training, an engagement with Aristotelian practical philosophy that
began during her earliest days as a student under Heidegger. Heidegger’s formative and ongoing intellectual influence on Arendt is by now a well-established fact, one she attested to on numerous occasions. As a graduate student, she attended some of his most influential Aristotle courses, including the highly influential *Plato’s* Sophist lectures. He considered her something of a protégé, and had an intermittent romantic relationship with her through much of the mid- to late 1920s. She continued to read his work avidly throughout her life and many of her key ideas, including the notion of common sense, are articulated in relation to his philosophy. Indeed, in a letter from the early fifties to Heidegger describing the project that would become *The Human Condition*, she wrote, “I would not be able to do this...without what I learned from you in my youth.”

While those early lectures where formative for Arendt’s conception of common sense, in her direct engagements with Heidegger Arendt typically used *Being and Time* as her critical touchstone. *Being and Time* was an existentialist rearticulation of Aristotelian practical reason that had grown out of the early Aristotle lectures she had attended. The two parts of *Being and Time* are organised around Aristotle’s two forms of practical reason: *techne* dominates the first part, while the second part outlines Heidegger’s contemplative existential version of *phronēsis*. *Being and Time*’s arguably most important philosophical contribution is the idea of “being-in-the-world,” and Heidegger spends the highly influential Book V analysing its constitutive concept “being-in.” Being-in incorporates both Aristotelian versions of common sense: the practical, utilitarian know-how of *koinē* *aisthēsis* along with the capacity for cultural and historical evaluation of *endoxα*. While Arendt’s formulation of common sense is undoubtedly simply a more accessible phrasing of “being-in,” in her theory of judgment she would seek a deeper understanding outside Heidegger’s philosophy.

Arendt’s early account of judgment came in her 1954 essay “Understanding and Politics.” Like Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, it was deeply informed by *Being and Time*’s Book V, actually anticipating many of Gadamer’s formulations. The argument is framed in classic hermeneutic terms of the interpretative circle: the virtuous circulation between knowledge and understanding. Understanding is our pre-cognitive ability to deliberate and act practically, a kind of contextual intelligence of our world’s structures and meanings. Understanding precedes cognition, providing the context that our pursuits of knowledge always start off from and return to. Cognition, in turn, increases the clarity of our understanding, improving our practical deliberations. Thus the famous “virtuous circle” of hermeneutic philosophy. Arendt identifies our capacity to understand with common sense in an identical formulation to Heidegger’s “being-in,” calling it the Ariadne thread tying our pursuits of knowledge back to our lived experience.

However, three years later, in August 1957, Arendt took extensive notes on the *Critique of Judgment*, discovering in it a different theory of judgment. In a letter to Karl Jaspers, she wrote that she had been “reading the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* with increasing fascination. There, and not in Kant’s *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, is where Kant’s real political philosophy is hidden.” Thereafter, her accounts of judgment would be expressed in concepts she adopted from the third
This is a surprising shift, given that a few years later in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer attacked Kant for formalising *sensus communis* by situating it as a faculty of the subject, thus dislodging it from its substantive cultural background. Why did Arendt ultimately side with Kant over Heidegger and, later, Gadamer? What inadequacies in hermeneutic theories of judgment led her away from them and toward Kant’s subjectivity-based *sensus communis*?

Her thought journal reveals that the third *Critique* offered a crucial refinement to her earlier hermeneutic account of judgment. Writing in German, she notes that the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* appealed to an unusual kind of Gültigkeit or validity, different from the universal validity of the first *Critique*, a validity which she finds Kant calling a “*subjektive Allgemeingültigkeit*,” a subjective general validity. She argues that when Kant uses the German word for “universal,” *Allgemein*, in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* he actually means “general,” for in German *Allgemein* can mean either. Arendt notes that this is explicitly opposed to the universal validity of the first *Critique* (“im Gegensatz zu universaler Geltung”). In contrast to the compelling effect the first *Critique’s* universal validity has on the mind, this subjective general validity “lays claim to validity but without compelling in the least.” Arendt seems never to have explicitly articulated the worry about the earlier hermeneutic theory of judgment that must have prompted her turn to the later Kantian theory; nevertheless, it can be more or less straightforwardly reconstructed by inference. In essence, her discovery of inter-subjective validity in Kant indicates that Arendt had come to see hermeneutic theories of judgment as rationally incomplete, and she therefore must have had something similar to the following argument in mind: Theories of judgment inspired by *phronēsis* contain a practical *aporia* that dates back to Aristotle’s original failure to account for the relation between *koinē aisthēsis* and *endoxa*. Phronetic theories of judgment ultimately cannot explain how common sense can be the source of better or worse judgments – why, given similar knowledge, a better judge should consistently make better decisions than poorer judges – because they merely force the two concepts together without truly explaining how they provide standards to each other. Without an account of their relation to each other, any account of practical reason is conceptually driven to accept one or the other version of common sense as the default standard, i.e. it must either accept a standard which is idiosyncratic to the individual or one based on the absolute authority of the community. While empiricists are ultimate driven to the former, phronetic theories such as Heidegger’s, Gadamer’s, and the early Arendt’s must adopt the *endoxa* of the individual’s community as their default standard. But when such a highly communitarian standard of common sense is accepted, we are logically unable to explain how there could be rational deviations in the behaviour of individuals taking part in a particular *endoxa*.

Heidegger’s strategy for escaping this trap was to appeal to an experience outside its framework. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger called the communitarian tendency of individuals to lose themselves in the *endoxa* of their community the existential structure “*das Man*”: the ontologically conditioned tendency to do “what one does” out of thoughtless social conformity. He argued that the only
way to escape *das Man* was through an existential confrontation with one’s mortality. In Heidegger’s case, this led back to a profoundly private articulation of phrasonic judgment, one that has no validity beyond the individual’s life story.\(^{25}\) Arendt had long been critical of this introspective turn in Heidegger’s philosophy, arguing that it removed the capacity of the public realm to illuminate the self-revelatory and *sui generis* deeds of action, in the process transforming human agency into an essentially contemplative and retrospective activity.\(^{26}\) In order for there to be an appropriate standard located directly in the phenomenon of common sense, what is needed is an account of it that is more intersubjective than *koinê aisthēsis*, but which does not lose itself in the community’s *endoxa*. Arendt believed that with his notion of a “subjective general validity,” Kant was the first to give a genuine account of how this was possible.\(^{27}\)

**The politically relevant elements of the third Critique**

Eighteenth century accounts of practical reason carried remarkably analogous problems to those Arendt was engaging. When the *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared, Kant was well aware its epochal significance; he quickly recognised, however, that his peers did not appreciate this, largely due to its distance from the era’s mainstream thinking.\(^{28}\) Kant believed the Enlightenment’s central commitment should be to the ideal of rational individual autonomy, and felt he had provided a superior foundation for this. However, he had also placed a paradigmatically vast gulf between himself and his contemporaries. Eighteenth century philosophers were fascinated by aesthetic experience, widely speculating on its link to practical reason, including the pre-critical Kant himself.\(^{29}\) With his deontological and rationalist account of moral reasoning, Kant essentially asserted that his contemporaries’ ideas were outmoded. As a result, the third *Critique*’s major professional motivation became to show how Kant’s critical philosophy addressed the significant ideas of that period.

The major competitor to the Enlightenment in Germany was the *Sturm und Drang* movement led by Hamann, Goethe, and Kant’s former student Herder. The *Sturm und Drang* had a strong affinity toward Romantic nationalism, and was an outlet for impulses that challenged the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason, individual autonomy, and cosmopolitanism. Herder developed highly communitarian theories of language, interpretation, history, and aesthetics which strongly influenced many of the thinkers that inspired Heidegger to develop his own ontological hermeneutic philosophy. By the 1770s, tension had developed between Kant and Herder: Kant appeared to view Herder as representative of dangerous tendencies in the *Sturm und Drang* towards irrationalism, often caricaturing Herder’s actual opinions (to be fair, these were not always easy to discern).\(^{30}\) Herder had begun associating himself with what Kant called the movement’s “cult of genius,” which challenged the Enlightenment by arguing that the pure originality of true genius expressed the spirit of a culture and land, transcending laws of rationality.\(^{31}\) Kant viewed this as the intellectual legitimation of impulses toward
fanaticism, and was determined to show that even aesthetic experience was gov-
erned by rationally autonomous principles.32

However, Kant also wanted to connect his critical philosophy with the earlier lan-
guage of the Enlightenment. British and German Enlightenment thinkers, such as
Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and Hume had speculated
about the relation between moral and aesthetic judgment, linking both to certain
feelings or “sentiments.”33 Common sense was often invoked, though how it func-
tioned and the way it provided standards for particular judgments widely varied.34

Greatly influencing Kant had been Hume’s distinction between moral and aesthetic
sense, which asserted that moral sentiments are based on interests properly under-
stood, and therefore on reason, but that taste was based in common sense.35 But
Hume had observed a paradox in aesthetic judgment: while such judgments are inev-
itably subjective they cannot be fully subjective, for otherwise they could not not be
criticised.36 He eventually concluded that only an empirical consensus among qualified
critics could be appealed to, one which was bound by “the different humours of
particular men,” and “the particular manners and opinions of our age and country.”37

By the 1760s, Kant had absorbed most of the significant British Enlightenment
literature.38 Prior to beginning work on his critical philosophy, Kant had a similar
sentiment-based approach to morality and aesthetics. Although his eventual univer-

calist ethics can be detected, it was connected to moral feeling concerning the dignity of
mankind,39 while agreeing with his British contemporaries that an empirical consensus
must be its standard. After the Critique of Pure Reason appeared, Kant argued for the
categorical imperative as the a priori principle of morality, while continuing to suspect
that the standard of aesthetic judgment could only be a posteriori.40 But by 1787 Kant
had changed his mind, indicating in a letter that he had only recently worked out an a
priori principle of taste.41 The establishment of such a principle would have been
highly significant to his goals for the Enlightenment. It would have both brought
clarity to the Enlightenment’s disparate speculations on the relationship between
moral and aesthetic judgment, while also damaging the German Enlightenment’s
main competitor, the Sturm und Drang.

As in the first two Critiques, Kant illustrated the problem with an antinomy: the
feeling of pleasure in the beautiful is subjective in that it is a feeling, which suggests
a claim of beauty is only individually valid; yet, we think everyone should agree
with our claim.42 This recalls Hume’s paradox, but it also echoes the practical
aporia of phrontetic theories of judgment: is there a principle of judgment which is
able to account for the possibility of legitimate differences of opinion and better or
worse judgments? If I find a poem profound while you find it clichéd, is it possible
that both our opinions might be valid, but also possible for one of our opinions to
be better than the other?43

In the first Critique, Kant presents judgment as a mysterious faculty, and his
treatment is rather cursory. Anticipating Wittgenstein’s rule-following argument,
he argues that in cognition, where judgment’s function is to subsume particulars
under universal rules, any rule we establish for this process requires yet another
rule for its application, and so on indefinitely.44 The faculty of judgment simply
puts an end to this indefinite application of rules: “…whereas understanding is capable of being taught and equipped by rules, the power of judgment is a particular talent that cannot be taught at all but can only be practiced.” This cursory treatment of judgment was a result of the nature of transcendental argumentation: it is only possible to identify a faculty’s a priori principles if it can be shown that the faculty is in some respect autonomous. For Kant, human mind’s faculties (understanding, reason, imagination, judgment, etc.) interact differently depending on the context of experience or “domain,” as he calls it. In each domain, one faculty is legislative, providing the essential principles of that domain, while the other faculties merely support it. In the theoretical domain understanding is the legislative faculty, while in the practical domain reason is legislative. To the extent understanding and reason are not determined by other faculties within their respective domains but instead are legislative and autonomous, we can search for their a priori principles there. To show that this mysterious faculty of judgment had a genuine rationality of its own, Kant needed a realm of experience where judgment was autonomous, where it was not determined by another faculty but rather legislated to itself. If he could find this, it could then be possible to identify and justify a priori the structure of judgment.

Kant locates the domain of judgment in the “the feeling of pleasure and displeasure.” Kantian judgment is therefore ultimately a feeling; but it is a very complex and intelligent feeling, one that reflexively interacts with a wide variety of mental faculties depending on the context of experience. Kant argues that it is only in aesthetic experience, however, that judgment’s principles reveal themselves. In the first Introduction, he writes that “it is actually only in taste...that judgment reveals itself as a [faculty] that has its own principle and hence is justified...” The second Introduction confirms that this was his project: “In a critique of judgment, the part that deals with aesthetic judgment belongs to it essentially. For this [faculty] alone contains a principle that judgment lays completely a priori at the basis of its reflection on nature...”

Judgments of taste involve “merely formal purposiveness,” according to Kant. We find an object beautiful when its form seems to have been purposively made to appeal to the way our cognitive powers are made. Thus, what is being judged is not the object itself, but the response of the subject’s faculties to the form of the object. Since it would be “ridiculous” for someone with taste to claim that her pleasure in the beautiful is idiosyncratic, Kant reasons that beauty is not perceived directly through sense data. We may experience gratification in an attractive object, but such pleasure has no claim to validity on other human beings, since it is unavoidably idiosyncratic to our interests. In order for the feeling of pleasure to be universally communicable to other subjects it must not be interested, because interest is always particular to the individual. Pleasure in the beautiful, according to Kant, is “disinterested and free,” since “all interest either presupposes a need or gives rise to one.” He argues that the form of the beautiful object sets off a spontaneous interaction of our faculties of cognition and imagination, what he calls a harmonious “free play” among them, and since the domain of cognition is universally communicable this means that the pleasure experienced in their free play is also universally communicable.
To this point, however, no judgment of taste has been passed. Kant has only shown that pleasure in the form of the beautiful object is disinterested and universally communicable. There is still no explanation and justification for judgments of taste, and therefore no account of how aesthetic experience gives insight about the faculty of judgment. A second moment must now take place where taste is appealed to in order to judge this feeling. This judgment of taste is not based on individual inclinations, but rather appeals to a structure of judgment that takes a perspective stretching far beyond personal inclinations. Kant calls this essential structure of judgment sensus communis. In her interpretation of Kant, Arendt places heavy emphasis on the fact that this second moment is when judgment occurs. Kant initially describes sensus communis as an implicit sense which must be presupposed so that there can be an attunement among the mental faculties. However, in S40 Kant’s account of common sense becomes more intuitive. He explains how it draws on the faculty of reproductive imagination, stating that “we must here take sensus communis to mean the idea of a sense shared by all of us, i.e., a power to judge, that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else’s way of presenting something, in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general.” He calls this having “enlarged mentality.”

Kant goes on to describe how sensus communis works stating, “Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgment not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgments of others, and thus put ourselves in the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that may happen to attach to our own judging...” In other words, the appeal to sensus communis is not to our own idiosyncratic likings, but rather to an imagined standpoint that takes into account how other judges would judge our feeling. It is crucial to understand, however, that this appeal to common sense is not a decision procedure: in the moment of judging, I do not try to think up different standpoints, as Kant’s initial formulation here might suggest. Kant almost immediately qualifies his description: “Now perhaps this operation of reflection will seem too artful to be attributed to the ability we call common sense. But in fact it only looks this way when expressed in abstract formulas.” Enlarged mentality is not a procedure of thought, but a standpoint I cultivate removed from my private point of view which takes in others’ points of view, and it is from this broader standpoint that I pass judgment. Arendt quotes Kant writing a bit later in S40: “However small may be the area or the degree to which a man’s natural gifts reach, yet it indicates a man of enlarged thought if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a general standpoint...” In other words, someone with common sense always, of course, has her own partial point of view; but she also has a second point of view, a more expansive viewpoint that by its very nature is in the broadest sense political.

At this point, certain implicit features of Kant’s account of sensus communis need to be fleshed out somewhat: Who is the “everyone” to which I refer, and to what community do I appeal in seeking this general standpoint? In principle, since the faculties in question are present in all human beings, the “everyone” I refer to is potentially the entire human race. However, this principle of the universality of
judgment is delimited by the fact that, as both Kant and Arendt repeatedly empha-
sise, the *sensus communis* is only valid for all *judging* subjects.\(^{70}\) They both insist
that we take into account the views of everyone’s “*possible* judgments,” i.e. their
point of view *only under the hypothetical condition that they had judged*, even if in
actuality they have not cultivated taste and cannot judge. When we claim that
something is beautiful, we are not appealing to the unreflective pleasure in the
beautiful that any human being is capable of; rather, we are appealing to what
their feeling of the beautiful *should* be if they had cultivated a sense of taste.

Moreover, in practice, this community I appeal to is significantly delimited by
the practical considerations involved in the cultivation of taste. Kant points out
that each subject has to start from “*crude dispositions given by nature,*” and begins
cultivating their taste through the examples of judgment and artistic taste provided
by those who influence and train them, through the exemplary works of the human-
ities, and through reciprocally communicating their pleasure to others who also
have cultivated a sense of taste.\(^{71}\) This is a key point for Arendt. She repeatedly
emphasises that judgment is cultivated above all by the “*company*” we choose: the
examples of judgment we rely on and appeal to in cultivating our common sense.\(^{72}\)
Thus, while in principle I could appeal to all judging subjects, in point of fact, my
*sensus communis* is by far more influenced and cultivated by those whose judgment
I trust, who I take to be examples of good judgment and taste, and those who I
spend my time reciprocally communicating my judgments with. Thus, both for
practical considerations and in principle, Arendt asserts that the proper translation
of Kant’s *Allgemeingültigkeit* in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* is not “universal
validity,” because in actual fact it is not truly universally valid; the proper trans-
lation is “generally valid.”\(^{73}\) It is generally valid because the validity it appeals to is
hypothetical: it asserts a claim on all subjects not categorically, but only insofar as
they have developed a capacity to judge by participating in *sensus communis*.

The upshot of this is a kind of oblique rejection of cultural relativism. Kant, and
Arendt following him, draws a distinction between what he calls *sensus communis*, or
ture common sense, and “*community sense,*” the unreflective prejudices I grow up with
in my community and culture, which presumably – fairly or not – Kant had in mind
when he thought of the *Sturm und Drang*, and Arendt when she departed from her
earlier hermeneutic account of judgment.\(^{74}\) According to Kant, “*community sense*” is
common sense at its lowest common denominator: it is literally “*common*,” denoting a
kind of vulgarity and lack of cultivation. *Sensus communis* implies a sense of civilisation
– a certain cultivation, humaneness and sensitivity – irrespective of whatever culture or
community I happen to grow up with and live in.\(^{75}\) As a result, there is in principle no
exceptions made for cultural differences for both Kant and Arendt; to the extent judging
subjects participate in *sensus communis* – no matter what their cultural backgrounds and
practices may be – as they “*quarrel*” or debate about objects of taste, they will over time
move toward consensus as they cultivate more sensitivity in their common sense struc-
tures of judgment.

Kant could now deal his blow to the *Sturm und Drang*’s challenge to the
Enlightenment. In a scathing section drenched in irony and contempt, Kant
explains how genius and taste remain governed by rationally autonomous laws. He begins by acknowledging that the production of great art requires more than taste alone, but must also have what he calls “spirit” [Geist]: “Of certain products that are expected to reveal themselves at least in part to be fine art, we say that they have no spirit, even though we find nothing to censure in them as far as taste is concerned. A poem may be quite nice and elegant and yet have no spirit. A story may be precise and orderly and yet have no spirit.” Kant argues that spirit is a unique endowment of talent and originality which “cannot be communicated but must be conferred directly on each person by the hand of nature. And so it dies with him, until some day nature again endows someone else in the same way...”

However, Kant then argues that of the two faculties necessary for great art, it is taste, and not genius, which is the higher and more important faculty. He argues that only “charlatans” with “shallow minds” believe that they can display genius by ignoring standards of taste. Whatever inherent brilliance an artist may have, it is futile, according to Kant, without the element of taste, “for if the imagination is left in lawless freedom, all its riches in ideas produce nothing but nonsense...”

Taste...consists in disciplining (or training) genius. It severely clips its wings, and makes it civilised, or polished; but at the same time it gives it guidance as to how far and over what it may spread while still remaining purposive. It introduces clarity and order into a wealth of thoughts, and hence makes the ideas durable, fit for approval that is both lasting and universal, and hence fit for being followed by others...

In other words, whatever fundamental human freedom is registered in artistic genius, it is futile without a form that is “communicable” to those who constitute its community of judges. As Kant says in a slightly different context, “Its value is increased almost infinitely by the idea of its universal communicability.”

Arendt and her critics

In view of her background as a refugee who fled Nazism, it seems difficult to exaggerate how important the discovery of this inter-subjective validity in Kant would have been for Arendt. Of course, it would be an oversimplification to simply equate the two movements, especially in view of Herder’s republican political sympathies; but given her substantial knowledge of German Romanticism, Arendt likely viewed Kant’s position in relation to the Sturm and Drang as analogous to her own position in relation to Heidegger and the Nazis. The danger of social conformity in the context of an authoritarian community was an experience that clearly animated her thought for the rest of her life. Her work going forward might fairly be thought of as an ongoing attempt to articulate the worldly conditions underlying the idea of inter-subjective validity: to give due recognition to the condition of human plurality – the fact that “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” – while also recognising that these radically unique individuals inhabit a common world whose purpose is “to gather them together, to separate and to relate them.”

From a theoretical perspective, Arendt believed Kant’s ideas offered her two significant advances. First, it articulated the unique form of validity that applies to...
political judgments and opinions. It had uncovered a hidden structure in the faculty we prosaically call common sense, rooted in our imagination’s capacity to step outside itself and see the world from a more broad-minded and cultivated point of view, while still never truly leaving the conditions of our “common world” behind. This is not an “Archimedean point” which seeks a perspective outside our worldly conditions to attain the final truth about politics, but one which remains situated within our common world, though it now can see the world more broadly. We might think of enlarged mentality like hiking up a mountain: the more we cultivate our judgment, the higher we ascend, and the further we can see within our world. Yet, enlarged mentality still always remains situated within our world. Arendt is in essence arguing that common sense gives us the capacity to have two perspectives on the political world: one which is rooted in our basic idiosyncratic perspective, and another which is more broad-minded, and therefore capable of taking into consideration how other judges view the world. It is literally a political sense of taste.

Secondly, Kantian aesthetics gave Arendt an account of the relationship between judgment and action. She recognised this relationship as early as her 1957 notes: “...in politics judgment and action behave like taste and genius (Auch verhält sich Urteil und Tat in der Politik genau wie Geschmack und Genie).”86 The failure to recognise the nature of this relationship lay behind what she argued was a deep contradiction in Kant’s practical philosophy. Kant’s moral philosophy took the viewpoint of the actor, while his political/historical philosophy took the spectator’s view.87 She argues that Kant’s philosophical commitments led to a deeply conflicted account of this relationship, illustrated clearly in his assessment of the French Revolution, where he was compelled to applaud the event’s significance to mankind’s moral worth, while deploring the specific deeds of the revolutionary actors. What Kant was missing, according to Arendt, was an account of action that recognised its natality, its fundamental nature as the capacity to begin a new story – a new chain of meaningful events not in a noumenal realm but in the concrete human world. If he had, she argues he could have resolved the contradiction between the actor and the spectator in his practical philosophy through analogy to the taste and genius relationship, instead of what turned out to be the ultimately dangerous application to history of the second part of the third Critique’s teleological form of judgment.88

Arendt’s project has been criticised on a number fronts, but perhaps the most damaging have been those arguing that the project is fundamentally flawed because Kantian aesthetic judgment is non-teleological and non-cognitive – two characteristics which any adequate account political judgment would seem to demand. Critics such as Ronald Beiner, Jürgen Habermas and Peter J Steinberger argue that Arendt’s sharp distinction between truth claims and political opinion89 indicates an unacceptable cognitive irrationality in Arendt’s conception of political judgment, “a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion,” in Habermas’ words, “that cannot be closed with arguments.”90 Elsewhere, Beiner and Andrew Norris argue that Kantian aesthetic judgment is fundamentally incompatible with political life, due its stated aim of achieving disinterestedness.91 This, Beiner argues,
leads to a conception of political judgment which is unacceptable because it has no structural capacity to accommodate teleological judgment. While a non-teleological account of judgment it is perfectly appropriate in the context of reflection on the beautiful, politics inevitably involves purposes and interests.

We are now in a position, I believe, to see how Arendt would have responded to these attacks. Kant scholars have increasingly noted that there appear to be two forms of judgments of taste in the third *Critique*: a purely disinterested and largely non-cognitive version that Kant articulated for purposes of philosophical clarity and transcendental deduction in the early sections, and a later version admitting certain interested and conceptual elements in Kant’s subsequent comments on broader aesthetic phenomena. The earlier “pure” judgments of taste would appear to apply to only a vanishingly small number of phenomena. As I noted earlier, within the context of the larger argument of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant’s primary objective in examining aesthetic judgment had been to find a sphere of experience where judgment was autonomous, and through this to articulate its fundamental principle. Kant had introduced the concept of reflective judgment largely for this specific purpose, and moreover, articulated a highly subjectivist initial account of *sensus communis*, which he claimed provides for the “attunement” of the mental faculties. Through this careful transcendental psychology, Kant was able to articulate a compelling account of the psychological operation of aesthetic judgment. But when Kant turns in the later sections to judgments associated with broader aesthetic phenomena, *sensus communis* is articulated a second time in a very different way, as “enlarged mentality,” while the nature of reflective judgment becomes much more ambiguous, relying heavily on a notion of exemplarity that is rather ambivalently distinguishable from straightforward conceptual judgments. Aesthetic contexts such as stories, poems, songs, and arguably even historical narratives clearly require both cognitive and interested elements to some extent, and as a result, Kant’s fundamental aesthetic criteria of disinterestedness and impartiality largely become a regulative aspiration which is unlikely to ever be fully realised in such contexts.

While Arendt’s critics seem to base their attacks on the earlier “pure” judgments of taste, she clearly understood her project to be a politicised version of these later “impure” judgments of taste. In virtually any place she discusses her political application of Kantian aesthetic judgment she of course appeals to Kant’s later version of *sensus communis* as “enlarged mentality,” and largely ignores Kant’s earlier psychological version. While it is not clear that Arendt ever explicitly recognised that there might be two distinct forms of aesthetic judgment in the third *Critique*, her heavy emphasis on the exemplarity of historical concepts and consistent articulation of *sensus communis* as “enlarged mentality” clearly demonstrate that she anchored her theory of judgment in these later “impure” judgments of taste. As a result, attacks on Arendt’s “Truth and Politics” essay, for instance, clearly misinterpret her as drawing far too strict a distinction between cognition and political opinion. It is perfectly possible for the same individual to seek to establish factual claims and also, in a separate capacity, to pass political judgment on those claims. Her point was merely that when we exercise judgment and when we establish truth claims we are acting in different capacities, employing different
faculties and claiming different modes of validity. When we deliberate with our peers, we should ideally be deliberating over a common set of pre-established facts, so that the question should not be Whose judgment is right or wrong?, but instead Whose judgment is more right or wrong? Similarly, there is clearly space for teleology in Arendt’s theory. She notes in the Kant Lectures that “the actor is partial by definition.” Thus, since she argues that Kant’s account of genius and taste in the later “impure” sections articulates the relation between action and judgment, she clearly understood the impartiality of judgment to be balanced and conditioned by our individual interests.

Conclusion

There are no doubt many remaining questions about Arendt’s use of Kant, and indeed, about the political and moral potential of the third Critique more generally; but if those questions can be resolved, I believe there are unique possibilities for reconceiving the nature of moral and political judgment in her theory. In the context of this article, one question in particular stands out: the preceding discussion may very well suggest that Kant was never able to fully escape the traditional Aristotelian lacuna of common sense. If, as appears to be the case, Kant himself was forced by his own philosophical analysis into articulating an earlier psychological version of common sense which echoed koinē aisthēsis, and a later inter-subjective description that tended toward endoxa, then it might be argued with a fair degree of justification that Arendt’s project remained trapped in the very ambiguities surrounding common sense she had tried to escape. Nevertheless, I would argue that the basic structure of “enlarged mentality,” which Arendt clearly gave priority to in the context of political judgment, remains a significant advance in resolving the problem. While the need to articulate a highly subjective version of common sense may ultimately always be some kind of necessity in the context of such a psychologically oriented discussion as judgment, the idea of enlarged mentality in many ways threads the needle between koinē aisthēsis and endoxa, allowing the individual judge to “choose her company”: to decide, to a certain degree, as to the community of judges she will appeal to in claiming general validity.

The political upshot of the idea of enlarged mentality would then, at least in principle, hold the potential to be a uniquely inclusive and cosmopolitan form of political judgment. While in practice there appear to be rather high standards to this form judgment, requiring a highly cultivated and committed kind of citizen judgment, in principle inclusion in the political sensus communis would remain open all who are willing to take part in public affairs and to cultivate a sense of political taste, regardless of one’s background or identity. As a result, Kantian enlarged mentality by its nature has built-in cosmopolitan structures and inclinations, was in fact developed with the specific intention of being so by Kant, and can in principle be expanded to include any judging subject, regardless of their culture or background in any country or community, provided they are willing to cultivating a sense of political taste. This is not to deny that there will always be innumerable obstacles separating individuals of different cultures and identities
from one another politically; yet, both Arendt and Kant seemed to believe that the more judgment is cultivated, this very diversity strengthens and improves it. Indeed, according to Kant’s logic, the greater the number of subjects and the more diverse their backgrounds, the better the eventual judgments will be. This was clearly one of the chief selling points for Arendt, who despite her commitment to the right of citizens to participation in specific, concrete political communities, nevertheless always maintained strong cosmopolitan sympathies.\textsuperscript{95} She regularly associated judgment with the Roman ideal of \textit{humanitas}, “the political fact,” she tells us, “that in Rome people of widely different ethnic origins and descent could acquire Roman citizenship and thus enter into the discourse among cultivated Romans, could discuss the world and life with them.”\textsuperscript{96} According to Arendt, good judges are highly motivated to seek out the points of view of other judges they may even disagree with but whose judgment they nevertheless still trust. This, she said, is what the Romans called seeking out good company. She writes:

> Then we shall know how to reply to those who so frequently tell us that Plato or some other great author from the past has been superseded; we shall be able to understand that even if all criticism of Plato is right, Plato may still be better company than his critics… We may remember what the Romans… thought a cultivated person ought to be: one who knows how to choose his company among men, among things, among thoughts, in the present as well as the past.\textsuperscript{97}

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\textbf{Notes}

1. Going back only 10 years: Degryse (2011); Ferrara (2008); Garsten (2010); Passerin d’Entreves (2006); Strong (2012); Thiele (2005); Zerilli (2005).
4. This is especially evident in her first significant elaboration of judgment, in her 1964 lectures on “Kant’s Political Philosophy.” This earlier version of the well-known 1970 lectures deals much more substantively with the third \textit{Critique} and places common sense at the very centre of its analysis, exploring it not only in Kant, but also in Cicero, Dubos, Muratorri, Gracian, Gottsched, and Baumgarten. See Arendt (n.d.).
13. In S23 of the 1924 Plato’s Sophist lectures Arendt had attended, Heidegger discussed the relationship between *phronēsis* and what he takes Aristotle to call “*aisthēsis,*” which Heidegger considers to be common sense in its broadest existential meaning.
22. Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 574, 575. Though she did not always state it explicitly in her writings, Arendt continued to see the question of inter-subjective validity as the key purpose of her theory of judgment. See her exchange with Hans Jonas at a 1972 conference on her work in *Hannah Arendt, The Recovery of the Public World* (Arendt, 1979).
25. One might also speculate that Gadamer’s later turn to Platonism derived from a similar impulse.
34. Schaeffer, “*Sensus Communis,*” 5–8; Townsend, “Shaftesbury to Kant,” 288ff, 291ff.
35. Townsend, 299ff; Hume (1757: 142ff).
41. Kant, 46, 89ff.
43. In formulating my interpretation of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, I have referenced the following works; Allison (2001); Guyer (1979, 1992); Kant (2004); *Kant*. New York,
44. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A133/B172.
45. Kant, A133/B172- A134/B173.
47. Kant, 174ff, 197–198.
48. Kant, 225’.
49. Kant, 244’–245’.
51. Kant, 225’.
52. Kant, 244’.
53. Kant, 193. Allison notes “Kant’s clear privileging of taste from the standpoint of transcendental critique...” in *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, 4-6ff.
54. Kant, 188ff, 221–222.
55. Kant, 189.
57. Kant, 212.
59. Kant, 204ff.
60. Kant, 205, 209ff.
61. Kant, 217.
64. Kant, 238–239.
65. Kant, 293–294.
66. Kant, 294.
67. Kant, 294.
68. Kant, 295; this is Arendt’s translation from *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 71.
69. Kant, 296ff, 355.
74. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 293ff; Arendt, “Kant’s Political Philosophy” (1964), 032266ff; *Lectures*, 70ff.
75. Kant, 355–356; Arendt, “Kant’s Political Philosophy” (1964), 032291, 032298; “Crisis of Culture,” 221–222.
76. Kant, 313.
77. Kant, 309.
78. Kant, 309.
79. Kant, 310.
80. Kant, 319.
81. Kant, 319.
82. Kant, 297.
85. Arendt, 53.
86. Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 582.
95. Arendt spoke positively of the idea of “world citizenship” as late as her essay on Jaspers and in the 1970 lectures on Kant’s political philosophy, and moreover, she was highly active in the European integration movement during the fifties. See Young-Bruehl, *Love of the World*, 158, 280–286. Positive comments on cosmopolitanism can be found in Arendt (1968b, 1968c, 2005); *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 75.
96. Arendt (1968b: 25); see also, Arendt, “Crisis in Culture,” 220–222.

References


