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Samantha Fazekas: Hannah Arendt's Unwritten Chapter on Judging

Review: Samantha Fazekas: *Hannah Arendt's Unwritten Chapter on Judging*. (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2025). 211 pp., 69.95 € (hardback) / 69.95 € (ebook).

It is well-known that Arendt did not finish *The Life of the Mind*. While the first two parts (on 'Thinking' and 'Willing') were completed prior to her death in 1975, the third part (on 'Judging') was never written. Since its posthumous publication in 1978, along with the publication of her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* in 1982, commentators have grappled with the question of 'what Arendt would have said'. Her Kant lectures have been a central resource for attempts to answer this question, as they contain Arendt's claim that Kant's 'unwritten' (or 'hidden') political philosophy was in the third *Critique* and its account of aesthetic, reflective judgment.

In *Hannah Arendt's Unwritten Chapter on Judging*, Samantha Fazekas offers "a new reading" of Arendt on judgment (p. 2). One might wonder, with how much ink has been spilled on this topic over the last few decades, what new things could be said about it. However, such concerns are quickly put to rest. Through a careful textual engagement with both Kant and Arendt, Fazekas offers a reconstruction that is both coherent and compelling. Such an intervention stands out precisely because it emphasizes not Arendt's rupture with Kant but rather her deep continuity with him concerning the structure of judgment.

Fazekas distinguishes her novel interpretation from the two dominant strands in the literature. The first holds that Arendt plainly misreads Kant. The second sees her turn to reflective judgment as inconsistent with the rest of her political thought. In contrast to both, Fazekas aims to defend Arendt's turn to reflective judgment by showing that such a turn can be seen as consistent with both Kant's aesthetics and Arendt's political thought. Such claims are rooted in the idea that judging aesthetically and politically involves "falling back on our own capacity for autonomous discrimination" (p. 2).

In what follows, I first provide an overview of the book's seven chapters. I then conclude by reflecting on some of the book's main contributions, as well as some potential limitations.

The distinction between the public and the private realms occupies the first two chapters. In chapter 1, Fazekas shows how Arendt's seemingly sharp division between the public and the private is a consequence of her prioritization of the *vita activa* (the active life, which concerns the human activities of labor, work, and action) over the *vita contemplativa* (the contemplative life, which concerns the mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging). In other words, she establishes a hierarchy that privileges those activities which contribute to the establishment of the political world and denigrates those which do not.

The argument of chapter 2 is that Arendt's division between the public and the private is less rigid than it appears. To this end, Fazekas develops an Arendtian phenomenology of privacy. Arendt speaks of a "non-privative characteristic of privacy," which suggests that privacy itself has both privative and non-privative dimensions. While the former pertains to the household and is opposed to political life, the latter is in fact oriented towards the public sphere. In other words, while the non-privative takes place in the private sphere, it nonetheless functions as a bridge between private and public life.

Chapter 3 builds on the previous chapter by showing that the activities of the mind can be located in the non-privative sphere. That is, thinking and willing are not antithetical to politics, despite taking place outside of it. Our contemplative activities are a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for generating and sustaining the political world. Indeed, the eradication of the non-privative sphere would lead to the disappearance of the public realm.

Chapter 4 turns to Arendt's notion of the enlarged mentality, which Arendt characterizes as a "political capacity." Some commentators have taken this to mean that the enlarged mentality is a public phenomenon, that is, as something that takes place with actual others rather than hypothetical others. Relatedly, other commentators have pointed out that Arendt parts ways with Kant in grounding the *sensus communis* in actual human communities rather than an *a priori* account of our cognitive faculties. Against both, Fazekas contends that the enlarged mentality is a reflective activity in which we imagine the standpoints of others. Moreover, she contends that it is a non-privative capacity.

Chapter 5 zeroes in on the impartiality that Arendt takes to be characteristic of political judgment. Fazekas shows that impartiality is a feature of judgment that emerges from two mental operations: imagination and reflection. Through these, we are able to both distance ourselves from our immediate sensations and represent the perspectives of others. Hence, while the enlarged mentality is a non-privative ability, the impartial standpoint that it enables is preparatory for engaging in public discourse.

Chapter 6 takes up the question of how our judgments can attain validity. One of the most famous criticisms of Arendt's use of Kant is that it 'aestheticizes politics', which is to say, it subjectivizes opinion and thus removes rationality from public discourse. Fazekas defends Arendt against this charge, showing how the imagination has the potential to bridge the non-private and the public realms. In this way, Arendt is able to map the idea of anticipated dialogue with others in Kant onto her own idea of public discourse and debate.

Fazekas concludes in chapter 7 by showing how Arendt is able to make good on her claim of fulfilling Kant's unwritten political philosophy. While Kant seems to gesture at a world dimension of judgment through his appeal to exemplarity, Arendt radicalizes this insight by connecting it to the enactment of political principles. As a result, she is able to bring the general validity of judgments to fruition as something that takes place in testing out one's judgments with others rather than merely in thought.

In all of this, Fazekas demonstrates that Arendt is much closer to Kant than is standardly thought. This does not, of course, mean that she does not sometimes part ways with him, as Fazekas herself acknowledges. And yet where Arendt strays from Kant, she

argues, it is nonetheless in the spirit of his thought. Across the later chapters, Fazekas shows how enlarged mentality, impartiality, and exemplarity form the basis of a conception of judgment that is both reflective and autonomous, on the one hand, and worldly and grounded in shared communal life, on the other.

As alluded to already, Fazekas offers a close reading of both Arendt and Kant – something that can not always be said of the literature on this topic. This is especially the case with Kant, as many commentators rarely venture beyond those passages of Kant's which Arendt herself cites. Looking deeper into Kant and providing an adequate exegesis of his aesthetic theory in the third *Critique*, as Fazekas does, reveals that there is more at stake than is often acknowledged. All of this is accompanied by a thorough command of the existing literature, which allows Fazekas to situate herself against the prevailing views on the issue. Indeed, one gets the impression that the ability to derive new conclusions on this front is a consequence of a deeper and more thorough engagement with the relevant texts.

Another virtue of Fazekas' work is that it clearly demonstrates the centrality of the public/private distinction for Arendt's account of judgment. Certainly, the most original aspect of the work is its development of the notion of the 'non-privative'. In identifying a sphere of solitude and withdrawal that is neither fully private nor fully public, Fazekas shows us that Arendt saw the *vita contemplativa* as both distinct from the *vita activa* and yet necessary for its emergence in the political world.

To the extent that Fazekas' primary aims are interpretive, however, there is a question about the normative dimension of the views she defends. That is, the reader might find themselves persuaded by Fazekas' reading of Arendt and yet wonder what follows from it. What potential does it have to address contemporary political challenges? How might it inform our ways of being and acting in the world? Thus, while the book deepens our understanding of Arendt's political thought, it leaves open the question of how such an understanding might orient us today in a time where the very capacity to judge seems in crisis.

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