

Politics Without Measure? Reading Exemplarity in *The Human Condition*

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ABSTRACT: Commentators have sometimes interpreted Arendt's criticism of the use of measures in politics as leading to an anti-idealistic vision of politics that prioritizes *sui generis* action over normatively guided action. In this essay, I argue that Arendt was more ambivalent on the role of measures in politics than has often been supposed. I argue, first, that Arendt's criticism of measures in *The Human Condition* extends only as far as instrumental kinds derived from extra-worldly sources, like a transcendent realm of forms or an immanent realm of passions or cognitions. Second, I argue that Arendt prepares for an appropriately political conception of measures within *The Human Condition*, thus linking that text to her later writings on judgment where exempla are suggested as fulfilling this role. Finally, I summarize how exempla satisfy a conception of measures consistent with worldliness, plurality and natality.

KEYWORDS: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Exemplarity, Normativity, Plurality, Natality, Judgment.

We need not choose here between Plato and Protagoras, or decide whether a god or man should be the measure of all things; what is certain is that the measure can be neither the driving necessity of biological life and labor nor the utilitarian instrumentalism of fabrication and usage.¹

¹Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 174.

Introduction

THIS IS HOW HANNAH ARENDT ENDS THE FOURTH CHAPTER, "WORK," OF *The Human Condition*. The suspenseful "we need not choose here . . ." is like many of her other transition sentences throughout that text, where one section concludes by exposing a pivotal question that is then addressed, usually implicitly, in the subsequent section. This is the case, for example, between the sections (Sec. 22–23) immediately preceding the chapter transition in question, where Arendt says at the end of section 22 that Plato's reply to Protagoras—that a god, not man,² is the measure of all things—"would be an empty, moralizing gesture if it were really true [. . .] that instrumentality [. . .] rules the realm of the finished world as exclusively as it rules the activity through which the world and all things it contains comes into being."³ Arendt's subsequent discussion of works of art in section 23 then becomes an argument for why Plato's retort against Protagoras is *not* an empty, moralizing gesture: works of art, indeed finished things in general, "transcend" the instrumental activity of fabrication through which they come to completion and, in so doing, stabilize the world as a meaningful "home for mortal men."⁴ The ability of works of art to transcend instrumentality in this way depends, she says, on their "adequacy or inadequacy to what they should look like," that is, their adequacy or inadequacy, "in Platonic language," to the "*eidōs* or idea [. . .] that preceded their coming into the world and that survives their potential destruction."⁵

Arendt's defence of the non-instrumentality of finished things in section 23 makes her concluding claim in the final sentence of that section and the chapter on work, cited in my epigraph, somewhat odd. If it is not "man" but "ideas" that are the measure of all things, as she had just argued with the help of Plato, why does she go on to say, "We need not choose here between Plato and Protagoras," instead of "Plato was right?" Why does she opt for *displacing* the question of appropriate measure instead of answering it directly? Presumably, part of the answer has to do with the fact that while Plato seems to have gained the upper hand at this point of the text, Arendt still has much more to say about the precise character of his alternative and its appropriateness for the *vita activa*. From this perspective, we might read Arendt's displacement of the question of measure in the section on art as traversing the boundary between the chapters on work and action and pointing

²Arendt uses "man" and "men" as universals for persons. In what follows, I have maintained Arendt's usage in summaries and paraphrasing for consistency (for a discussion of Arendt and feminism, see Bonnie Honig, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* [State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995]).

³Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167.

⁴Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173.

⁵Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173.

us into the orbit of her famous section 31 in the chapter on action where she argues that Plato inaugurated the violent tradition of political philosophy by transposing the framework of *homo faber* into a higher realm of being, one where transcendent Ideas accessible only to philosopher-kings provide measure for all things, including the “raw material” of human beings.⁶ On this reading, Arendt’s displacement of the question of measure at the end of chapter four would come to a conclusive close with her forceful criticism of Plato near the end of chapter five, leaving the impression that, in relation to the realm of the *vita activa*, the question of measure is ultimately illegitimate.

Commentators that see in Arendt’s discussion of action an endorsement of radical novelty have long read her in this way.⁷ Action as the capacity to begin anew in concert with others is unstandardized and unstandardizable. It cannot be measured, only endured and redeemed. And *The Human Condition* is thereby understood as unambiguously affirming a resolutely anti-idealistic vision of politics, the core contribution of which is to disabuse us of the notion that realm of human affairs can be understood from Archimedean perspectives from which the question of measure arises at all.

However, hewing too closely to Arendt’s anti-Archimedean polemic threatens to mire our understanding of the nature and role of measures in politics in an all-or-nothing binary that satisfies neither phenomenologically nor textually. Phenomenologically, since neither spectators nor actors exercise their capacities in a normative vacuum. And textually, since Arendt’s forceful criticism of Platonism in section 31 does not account for the fact that the final clause of the concluding sentence of chapter four—“what is certain is that the measure can be neither the driving necessity of biological life nor the utilitarian instrumentality of fabrication and usage”—implicitly affirms the legitimacy of the question of measure outside of her criticism of instrumentality, which although here explicitly refers to Protagoras nevertheless comes to include Plato as well. From this perspective, section 31 need not undermine the meaningfulness of the question of measure in its entirety but rather may simply serve to complete the critical discussion of instrumental measures prepared for in chapter four while leaving open just what type of measure is, on Arendt’s own terms, appropriate to the realm of the *vita activa*. If such an opening does exist, we would be led to entertain the pos-

⁶Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 227.

⁷We find this tendency most prominently in Nietzschean and Wittgensteinian strands of interpretation, for instance: Bonnie Honig, “The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response to ‘beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action’ By Dana R. Villa,” *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993); Dana Richard Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).; Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Toward a Democratic Theory of Judgment,” in *Judgment and Action: Fragments Toward a History*, ed. Vivasvan Soni and Thomas Pfau (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

sibility that the problem Arendt identifies with measures in politics stems less from some definitive quality that unambiguously discounts their value for and role in the space of appearances, and more from the predominance of but one of their possible aspects. There may, after all, be all-important differences in how measures appear to actors as they do to philosophers.

What I aim to show in this essay is that, despite her forceful criticisms of instrumental measures in politics, Arendt's response to the question of measure is in fact more ambiguous than has often been supposed. There is indeed a positive sense of measure that corresponds to the *vita activa* and the conditions of plurality and natality; one that is apparent on the surface as well as beneath the text; and that is eventually brought to light more explicitly in her later writings, especially those on judgment. Although she does not directly articulate it in *The Human Condition*, the kind of measure appropriate to the *vita activa* are exempla: "mental representations" or "visions" of out-standing persons and events capable of both guiding judgments concerning the "worth" of particulars in the present and inspiring action. Arendt's response to the choice between Protagoras and Plato will thus prove to be something of a mediation: *pace* Protagorean instrumentalism, exemplary measures are indeed "good for" something, provided what they are good for is not satisfying wants and needs but guiding and inspiring world-oriented judging and acting; and *pace* Platonic idealism, exemplary measures are indeed revealed to the mind's "inner eye," provided that the source of that revelation is not an Idea but an out-standing action or event that appears to the imagination from out of the shared world. It is neither sensible receptivity nor speculative thought to which we owe the givenness of exempla, but the reflective imagination's glimpsing the "spirit" or practical meaning of that which appears before us. As a mediating alternative to Protagoras and Plato, exempla can achieve something of the normative priority, coherence, and durability expected of normative measures or standards while nevertheless avoiding the world-destroying instrumentalism of Archimedean rules, principles, or laws. They would define our standpoint, as it were; the place from which we begin anew and to which we may return, again and again.

That Arendt's turn to exemplarity was intended to satisfy a conception of measures appropriate to plurality and natality bears on a host of important questions that have encircled not only her writings but political and moral thought more generally. What orientation to the past is conducive to plurality? How might we responsibly inherit that which we do not, at least in the first instance, choose? What role ought precedents play in politics, and what is the nature of their normative claim? How is public-oriented, deliberative judgment compatible with judgment as an action-oriented exercise of autonomy? While a body of literature addressing the relevance of exemplar-

ity to these and related questions has taken shape over the last few decades,⁸ Arendt's contributions have generally gone missed.⁹ Where they have been considered, interpretations have remained largely partial.¹⁰ Although it is

⁸In political theory, see: Alessandro Ferrara, "Exemplarity in the Public Realm," *Law & Literature* 30, no. 3 (2018); Alessandro Ferrara, "Debating Exemplarity: The 'Communis' in Sensus Communis," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2019); Melissa Lane, "Constraint, Freedom, and Exemplar: History and Theory Without Teleology," in *Political Philosophy Versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought*, ed. Marc Stears and Johnathan Floyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Lois McNay, "The Politics of Exemplarity: Ferrara on the Disclosure of New Political Worlds," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2018); Aletta Norval, "A Democratic Politics of Acknowledgment: Political Judgment, Imagination, and Exemplarity," *Diacritics* 38, no. 4 (2008). In ethics and moral philosophy: Rebecca Langlands, *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Irene E. Harvey, *Labyrinths of Exemplarity: At the Limits of Deconstruction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002); Onora O'Neill, "The Power of Example," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 61, no. 235 (1986); Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). In law: Amalia Amaya, "Exemplarism and Judicial Virtue," *Law & Literature* 25, no. 3 (2013); Maksymilian Del Mar, "Exemplarity and Narrativity in the Common Law Tradition," *Law & Literature* 25, no. 3 (2013). In rhetoric: John Arthos, "Where There Are No Rules or Systems to Guide Us: Argument From Example in a Hermeneutic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 4 (2003); Alexander Gellay, ed. *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Samuel McCormick, "Argument By Comparison: An Ancient Typology," *Rhetorica* 32, no. 2 (2014).

⁹For example, Arendt's name does not appear in two recent edited collections dedicated to exemplarity: Michele Lowrie, *Exemplarity and Singularity: Thinking Through Particulars in Philosophy, Literature, and Law* (London: Routledge, 2017); Gellay, *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*. Nor does "example" or its cognates appear in the indexes of the three companions to Arendt's thought (Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh, eds. *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* (London: Anthem, 2017); Peter Gratton and Yasmin Sari, eds. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Arendt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Dana Villa, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁰See, for example: Ronald Beiner, "Hannah Arendt on Judging," in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Brian Garsten, "The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment," *Social Research* 74, no. 4 (2007): 1086–100; Maurizio Passerin D'Entrèves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 251; Jonathan P. Schwartz, *Arendt's Judgment: Freedom, Responsibility, Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), Chapter Five. Of particular importance on this theme is the work of Alessandro Ferrara, who has followed Arendt in promoting exemplarity to the center of his own theory of political judgment but finds reasons to depart from her own account (Alessandro Ferrara, "Judgment, Identity and Authenticity: A Reconstruction

not the aim of this essay to wade into these debates directly, I do intend the picture it presents to establish a basis from which we might begin to do so.

I. From Work to Action

That the final sentence of the chapter on work operates as both a conclusion to the preceding chapter and a preface to the next is suggestive of what Patchen Markell has called the “non-territorial” dimension of *The Human Condition*.¹¹ As Markell demonstrates, the chapter on work represents something of a keystone for upholding the conceptual architecture of the text, both separating (or “territorially” defining) its own phenomenal domain against the others, while also over-reaching (or “de-territorializing”) those boundaries, either in a mode of encroachment or support. The territorial argument is presented in plain view: in relation to labor, work arises for purposes antithetical to the cyclicity and consumptiveness of the labor process. It produces durable use-objects that stabilize the world and provide temporal continuity against the natural rhythms of biological life.¹² And with respect to action, the means-ends cognitive process required by the activity of fabrication is antithetical to the unpredictability of action. In a world constituted by a pluralistic “web of relations,” the results of any action will always exceed whatever ends the actors might have intended.¹³

But work also over-reaches these distinctions in both directions. With respect to labour, Arendt argues that although work arises to provide a durable “human artifice” against the cyclicity of labor and consumption, that durability is nevertheless threatened by the fact that every finished object, every “end” to the activity of making, becomes a means to some further end through its very use and thus, when combined with the market and technological innovation, threatens to collapse the world-stabilizing activity of work back into the cyclicity it was meant to overcome. In the modern age, work thus comes to be “performed in the mode of labouring,” and its products “consumed as though they were consumer goods.”¹⁴ And with respect to action, Arendt argues that certain kinds of works, which she identifies initially as works of art but broadens to include “all finished things in general,” need not become means to further ends (be they the uses for which the object was produced or the end of subsistence for the producers

of Hannah Arendt’s Interpretation of Kant,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 24, no. 2/3 [1998])

¹¹Patchen Markell, “Arendt’s Work: On the Architecture of ‘the Human Condition,’” *College Literature* 38, no. 1 (2011): 15–44.

¹²Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 143.

¹³Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 232–33.

¹⁴Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 232.

themselves), but rather, in their very “uselessness,” achieve “permanence” by providing common points of meaning for the public sphere in which action takes place.¹⁵

The fact that Arendt opens the category of works of art to include “all things in general” means that the kinds of works supportive and necessary for action will include public artifacts of all kinds, like monuments, books, paintings, railways, or written laws. But it also means that far from being indifferent to works, action is also meaningfully responsive to the myriad of artifacts that constitute the “human artifice” and the public realm, thus providing this otherwise notoriously “thin” or “empty” concept with the content it needs to be intelligible.¹⁶ As Markell reads it, action can thus be seen as responding to the already existing human artifice and seeking to redraw its boundaries to make it look otherwise: “the instrumental purpose of a course of activity [. . .] is never *merely* instrumental, but implicates larger questions about, as Arendt would later say, ‘how the world is to look’ and ‘what kinds of things are to appear in it.’” On this reading, a supportive relationship forms in both directions: actors require “the intermediary, stabilizing and solidifying influence of things” to have anything to respond to at all,¹⁷ and their own actions are indeed responsive to the shape of the world as given by appearing things.¹⁸

Because we are concerned with whether or not the question of measure left hanging at the end of the chapter of work can be picked up in, and supportive of, the chapters on the *vita activa*, the transition from the first two of these purposes to third deserves a bit more attention. Specifically, we need to know the context in which the question of measure appears and what grounds we have for searching for its response in the subsequent chapters.

Markell identifies four features that constitute the work of *homo faber* in Arendt’s account: the durability of the objects it creates;¹⁹ the violence involved in the worker’s activity of reification;²⁰ the importance of the “model,” whether a mental image or a literal blueprint, that “guides work of fabrication”;²¹ and the instrumental character of work, which is “entirely determined by the category of means and end.”²² Arendt’s attempt to rescue work from the labor process in the final section on works of art does not, however, amount to abandoning the fundamental features of work

¹⁵Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173–74.

¹⁶Markell, “Arendt’s Work,” 35.

¹⁷Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.

¹⁸Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

¹⁹Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 139.

²⁰Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 139–40.

²¹Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 140ff.

²²Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 143.

(nor does it deny the practical necessity of utility in its proper domain of production), but rather involves an attempt to rethink those features anew in world-building articulations. Building upon Markell's account, we find that the section on works of art also contains modifications of each of the features just described: works of art are not just "durable" but achieve "permanence" and "immortality";²³ the violence required to "transform" raw material into finished products becomes a poetic "transfiguration" of nature through artistic creation, in which, for example, "the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames";²⁴ models are no longer mental or physical schematics for producing and re-producing use-objects *ad infinitum*, but are imaginal "standards" for judging the beauty of things;²⁵ and the means-end cognitive process involved in instrumental work is situated underneath, or is made subservient to, the activity of thinking, which provides "inspiration" for the creation of artworks.²⁶ Although works of art require means-ends cognition (since they unavoidably involve a productive process), their fabrication is no longer merely instrumental because the finished thing is rather a disclosure of the "useless process" of thought itself.²⁷

That Arendt did not abandon but rescued *homo faber* in the section (23) on works of art provides some weight to the suspicion that the question of measure is indeed legitimate outside her criticisms of instrumentality, now understood in the limited sense "of fabrication and usage." The kind of measure available to Arendt may then resemble what she meant by beauty as a standard for producing and judging art, since it is here that she identifies a positive sense of measure irreducible to means and ends determination.

There are, however, good reasons to be *prima facie* skeptical regarding a congruence between standards of art and standards of action. The two activities are distinct in many ways: all fabrication is oriented towards the production of tangible things, whereas the words and deeds of actors are intangible; the "who" of an artist is always in "competition" with their completed things' independent existence in public, whereas the "who" of an actor is always coincident with the public action itself;²⁸ the activity of making occurs in isolation, whereas acting occurs directly between "men *qua* men";²⁹ and makers are related to one another through a "purposeful combination of skills and activities," whereas acting involves direct "relations between

²³Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168.

²⁴Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168.

²⁵Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168.

²⁶Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168.

²⁷Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 171.

²⁸Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 211.

²⁹Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 213.

unique persons.”³⁰ But there are also good reasons to suppose that features of the description of the work of art nevertheless overreach these boundaries, not only in terms of the stabilizing effects of actual works on the public sphere, as described, but also in terms of the continuity of the conceptual architecture that Arendt introduces to describe appearances *qua* public appearances from the section on works of art onwards. If the section on works of art introduces a *literal* relationship between the activity of making and the stabilizing effect provided by *actual* finished things on the public space of appearances, it also introduces a *metaphorical* or figurative framework for apprehending the space of appearances as a place of spectators and actors. From this perspective, Arendt’s joinery between work and action reveals an analogical continuation of what we might call the positive, world-building features of appearing things discovered through her discussion of the plastic arts into the *vita activa* by way of their metaphorical continuities with the performing arts, drama and theatre in particular. Where the plastic artist produces a tangible work to be witnessed by a judging public independently of their intentions, so too do actors act before a public of spectators who judge those actions on the basis of their appearance. And where works of art achieve permanence and immortality by “shining light” or disclosing meaning in the space of appearances, so too do actions achieve permanence and immortality by enacting stories to a chorus of spectators who, by retelling them, reveal their meaning and bestow them to posterity. If the section on works of art presents a simultaneous incorporation and modification of the fundamental features of instrumental work in the service of saving *homo faber* from its denigration into cyclical labor, then the chapters on the *vita activa* also present, on this reading, an incorporation and modification of the features of the appearance of works of art in the service of saving public appearances *as such* from their exclusive ties with *homo faber*.

II. Gauging Greatness

Just as Arendt kept the reversal of the world-alienating modalities of instrumental work into world-building modalities of artistic work implicit in her section (23) on works of art, she similarly does not, in the chapters on the *vita activa* (5 and 6), make an explicit point of tethering her discussion back to those positive world-building features. The continuity that tends to stand out, on the contrary, is the critical discussion of the world-alienating features of the figure of *homo faber* as it improperly appears in the public realm (sec. 29–31), this time from the heightened perspective gained by her positive, if “thin,” description of action as the capacity to begin anew in concert with others. In this sense, the fifth chapter on action has a primarily

³⁰Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 213.

territorial tone. However, if we hold on to the idea that the world-building features may find a place in the chapters on action, a few footholds for developing Arendt's positive response to the question of appropriate measure do indeed appear.

A first step towards developing this positive response is to clarify the shift in terrain from the thing-character of work towards the more expansive domain of appearances in the *vita activa*, and in so doing propose a revision to the phrasing of the question of measure as pertaining to "all things" to accommodate the scope of Arendt's phenomenological ontology.³¹ Arendt's conception of reality is unique in that it avoids activities achieved in solitude, like the clear and distinct perception of cognitions, the determinative application of transcendental categories to sense-data, the solitary observation of empirical facts, or even the contemplative intuition of phenomenological essences. Rather, it depends on the sharing of phenomena between a plurality of perspectives—others in whose presence we are assured that what we perceive is as we perceive it. "For us," Arendt writes, "appearance [. . .] constitutes reality. [. . .] The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves;"³² Reality "entirely depends upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to its existence."³³ Being and appearing coincide in the space between (*inter-esse*) perspectives. Without such a sharing or publicity, all phenomena (of the passions, the mind, of discrete perception) "lead only an uncertain, shadowy existence."³⁴ If the question of measure is to apply to the world of words and deeds, then it should not just refer to all publicly appearing *things*, but to public appearances as such, inclusive of words and deeds.

³¹Arendt only reluctantly admitted her continuity with the phenomenological tradition. In my view, her distinctiveness within this tradition derives less from a revision of the subject matter of phenomenology (although this is significant) and more from her revision of the nature of phenomenality as such. Appearances show themselves in themselves as properly excessive of any single (set of) meaning(s) revealed to any single (set of) perspectives; their "essence" belongs to more than one (*pluralis*), not in the trivial sense of being shared property, but in the world-sustaining sense of remaining open to renewed acts of reflection and thus meaning. It is this excessiveness of phenomenal essences, coincident with their very givenness, that appearances can supply points of reference that support practically coherent meanings without undermining a plurality of possible meanings (Socrates was all of a Gadfly, Midwife and Stingray, for instance). *Esse* for Arendt is always *inter-esse*. (For an interesting discussion of the relation between essences and meaning, see: Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 Bis 1973* [Munich: Piper, 2003], 42).

³²Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95.

³³Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95.

³⁴Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

The most direct articulation of the kind of measure appropriate to the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition* comes at the end of Arendt's discussion of power in the chapter on action. There, she writes that "The only criteria of action is greatness," because "it is in [the nature of action] to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*."³⁵ As is typical with Arendt's discussion of other kinds of standards throughout *The Human Condition*, the standard of greatness arises from within a phenomenological consideration of the activity itself. In this formulation, the defining quality of action is its natal capacity of inaugurating a new beginning through the power gained by actors acting in concert. However, the natality of action directly depends on a condition of plurality, since it is by virtue of different perspectives witnessing the same action that the reality of the "new" can be confirmed at all. Without a plurality to witness and tell the story of an action, that action would remain in the shadowy realm of subjective perception, and the sense of realness would go missed. Following Kant, Arendt calls the capacity required for establishing the reality of novel appearances *sensus communis*, "the one sense that fits into reality as a whole our five strictly individual senses."³⁶ As Arendt puts it, common sense "gauges" the reality of what appears by "fitting" otherwise subjective and incommunicable sensations into a "non-subjective, 'objectively' common world that we may share and evaluate together with others."³⁷ Greatness is therefore a worldly criterion for action in the sense that it defines the revelation of an act in the space of appearances to a plurality of spectators who *gauge* its reality by common sense, and it is from this primary phenomenal inter-relationship that great acts then gain historical and communal durability through the telling of stories by spectators and their reifications by artists.

It is against Arendt's view of greatness as the proper criterion for action and the role of common sense for discerning it that we can appreciate just what she saw as problematic in the traditional use of measures and standards for understanding politics in political philosophy. As they were understood by the tradition, measures are, firstly, external to the *vita activa*. In order to locate them, the mind must turn elsewhere than the common world of shared appearances, like a transcendent realm of ideas or an immanent world of subjective processes. Second, they are determinative of action. They provide a political community with strictly determined rules and

³⁵Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 205.

³⁶Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 208.

³⁷This characterization is from an essay written shortly after *The Human Condition*, "Culture and Politics" (Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* [New York: Penguin, 2006], 181.)

roles, and thereby undermine natal action as novel appearing. Measuring, in this sense, is to apply a fixed measure, like a universally standardized ruler or scale, to the apparent reality of the world. It is to rule *over* appearances. Third, they imply a hierarchy between rulers and ruled, or between those who are in possession of the means of measuring and those that are not. The criterion for this capability in Plato was self-rule: the philosopher-king could command the city only if their soul commanded their body.³⁸ Action, on the other hand, is a capacity that arises wherever “men come together,” in principle available to everyone who appears in public.

It would seem, then, that greatness as gauged through common sense escapes each of these traditional political philosophical understandings of standards or measures. But it does so by largely voiding the terrain in which they were deemed useful. Arendt gives no indication that greatness has any orienting function or carries something like a form or schema for judging how the world or the things in it should look; some mental representation, image or shape seen by the inner eye in relation to which one judges whether something is great. From this perspective, the criterion of greatness as alternative to political philosophical measures seems to remove the idea of measure of any guiding content in favour of a retroactive or redemptive acknowledgment of novelty as such. One does not judge whether a given action fulfills some standard of greatness, but is rather startled into acknowledging and narrating the greatness on display. Judging loses all evaluative qualities and becomes pure description.

But is the redemptive acknowledgement and narration of greatness the entirety of Arendt’s response to the question of measure? Or might greatness as phenomenological criterion simply outline a one-sided and general picture that calls to be balanced and filled in with more detail? Might this be another case of Arendt working in two directions? (1) *against* the tradition of political philosophy by territorially emphasizing the *boundary* between the world-alienating, Ideal sense of measure found in the instrumental world-view of *homo faber* and the *sui generis* appearance of public words and deeds; (2) and *towards* a non-territorial view of the *vita activa* inclusive of a non-ideal, or less than Ideal, kind of measure supportive of political judgment and world-building action? As we will see, this question will draw us outside the text of *The Human Condition*. But not before we locate a few places where Arendt herself prepares such a departure within it.

³⁸Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 224.

III. Traces of Measure in the Vita Activa

“The reification and materialization without which no thought can become tangible is always paid for, and that the price is life itself: it is always the ‘dead letter’ in which the ‘living spirit’ must survive, a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again . . .”³⁹

“. . . Mnemosyne is the mother of the muses . . .”⁴⁰

We said that there may be a positive conceptual analogy between the appearance of works of art in the public sphere and the appearance of actors in the public sphere. With the former, Arendt said that thinking “inspired” the production of a work of art, and judgments concerning those works required a standard of beauty that both precedes and survives it. Arendt is unclear if there is any relation between the inspiration provided by thought, the process of cognition required in fabrication, and the standard by which spectators judge, and it is this lack of clarity that presents perhaps the central difficulty in imagining how standards and measures can resist Arendt’s criticisms of mere instrumentality.

Consider, for example, Arendt’s description of the contrast between Plato’s philosophical and his political thought. In his philosophical thought, represented in *The Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, ideas are understood as *ekphanestaton*, as “what shines forth most” and therefore “as variations of the beautiful.”⁴¹ In his political thought, represented in *The Statesman* and *The Republic*, “ideas are transformed into standards, measurements, and rules of behaviour, all of which are variations of the idea of the ‘good’ in the Greek sense of the word, that is, of the ‘good for’ or fitness.”⁴² The transformation from the beautiful to the good, or the turning from the apprehension of *ekphanestaton* outside the cave to their application as *eidos* within the cave, corresponds to a change in the meaning of ideas from open objects of wonder to determinative instruments for rule.⁴³ That they could be so transformed

³⁹Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 169.

⁴⁰Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 169.

⁴¹Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 225.

⁴²Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 225–26.

⁴³Arendt was indebted to Heidegger’s “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth” for appreciating this transformation (see: Miguel Abensour, “Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy Over Politics: Arendt’s Reading of Plato’s Cave Allegory,” *Social Research* 74, no. 4 [2007]: 955–82). Arendt did not follow Heidegger, however, in understanding this transformation as “coming to pass because the subjective act of vision” of

implies that they must bear some internal relation to one another, just as the inspiration of thought must bear some internal relation to the “end” of cognition and production in the fabrication of works of art. Somehow, in both cases, the activity of thought must yield an inspiring image that positively guides a productive process.

However, the model of artwork as it was articulated in section 24 implies more than the exclusively instrumental model of *homo faber*, which Arendt identifies as structuring Plato’s turn to the good over the beautiful. With the latter, the transformation seems to imply a total turn or about-face. Ideas are *either* useless (beautiful) objects of contemplation *or* useful standards for determining what something is good for. With respect to art, however, a mediating possibility is implied. While thinking similarly begins the process of production through “inspiration” (like wonder or *thaumazein* in philosophical contemplation), that inspiration does not dissolve into instrumentality through production but is rather carried through into the thing produced, in which it becomes visible and real (if non-identical to the inspiring thought). In this way, thoughts need not remain entirely internal to the mind, nor are its results doomed to instrumentality, for both the beginning (thinking) and end (artwork) of the process remain useless. Moreover, whatever connection exists between the inspiring thought and the finished thing, the meaning of the latter will always exceed the former, since meaning is the ultimate prerogative of spectators who “see the whole” — or at least more of it than the invested partiality of artists and actors.

Taking Arendt’s attention to the distinction between *ekphanestaton* and *eidōs* and the possibility of a non-instrumental relation between thinking and artwork that follows from it, we may look for further clues as to whether such a non-instrumental relationship might hold for the activities of actors and spectators in the public sphere, one that follows more closely the metaphor of dramatic arts instead of the fabricating arts. We might expect the “inspiring thoughts” of actors to be transformed into their words and deeds in public or on the stage, the meaning of which is then revealed and evaluated by the judgments of the “chorus” of spectators, who are themselves guided by something like “standards of beauty.”

the philosopher “takes precedence over objective truth (*aletheia*),” which Heidegger interprets as *Unverbergenheit* or disclosedness. Rather, she intimates a political reading of *ekphanestaton* by following Jacques Taminiaux’s rendering of this term as “the unity of all transcendentals united” (*unum, alter, ens, and bonum*), and by following Kant’s suggestion that the beautiful is dependent on human sociality *via* taste or the *sensus communis* (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 284.) The beautiful or radiant names worldly appearances as such: “the quintessence of the worldliness of the world. For every single human being” (Lotte Kohler, and Hans Saner, eds. *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926–1969* [New York: Harcourt, 1992], 320).

The closest Arendt comes to affirming the first half of this possibility (inspiring thoughts transforming into words and deeds of actors) in *The Human Condition* is in her reference to drama as a form of *mimesis*, where play-acting involves the imitation of action: "The specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and 'reified' only through a kind of repetition, imitation or *mimesis*."⁴⁴ In theatre, *mimesis* occurs in the writing of the play and the playacting itself. In both cases, imitation is neither a mere repetition of the factuality of a previous action or event, nor is it a semblematic reproduction of an Ideal original (an *anamesis*, as in Plato), but involves a creative re-production of the "who" of the persons or actors as they appear in the world, either on the page or on the stage.⁴⁵ If the writing is any good, play-actors will stand a better chance of disclosing the "who" of their characters. And if their performance is any good, spectators should feel they understand the meaning of the events through the words and deeds of the play-actors.

Although Arendt's discussion of *mimesis* in the dramatic arts is suggestive of a link to the nature of political action in which the public is analogized as a theatre, she does not directly claim such a link in *The Human Condition*. However, the conceptual structure of this analogy is nevertheless fulfilled in her discussion of political action in *On Revolution*, a text published five years after *The Human Condition*. Here, Arendt describes how, when faced with the awesome task of beginning anew, the American founders were compelled to "ransack the archives of ancient prudence" for guidance:⁴⁶ it was "by being nourished by the classics and having gone to school in Roman antiquity," Arendt wrote, that the founders came to "*consciously imitate* the Roman example and emulate the Roman spirit," and thus able to think of themselves as founders at all, that is, as responsible for and capable of inaugurating a new order from within the historical caesura opened up by the revolution without the aid of some "transcendent, trans-mundane source."⁴⁷ Arendt's discussion of imitation thus makes another appearance in the context of what, for her, is a paradigmatic (though imperfect) instance of revolution as such. And it does so alongside three other concepts that seem to bear sig-

⁴⁴Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 187.

⁴⁵Arendt is here drawing from Aristotle, who she uses to advance a conception of acting against the Platonic idea that actions are controlled from behind by an "invisible hand," as in puppetry (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 185). For Aristotle, while there is an original that play-acting imitates, that imitation is creative in its own right (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 187).

⁴⁶Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 191.

⁴⁷Arendt, *On Revolution*, 195–96.

nificance to its meaning: example, emulation and spirit. Her discussion thus warrants a more detailed consideration.

According to Arendt, that the American revolutionaries had “attuned themselves to the spirit of ancient prudence” was nowhere better on display as in their decisions, (1) to “shift the location of authority from the (Roman) Senate to the judiciary branch,” since what this demonstrated was their deep understanding of the Roman conceptual distinction between power (*potestas*), which occurs between actors and would be institutionalized in the legislative and executive branches, and authority (*auctoritas*) as “founding, augmenting and conserving,” and as would be institutionalized in the American courts;⁴⁸ and (2), the spirit of ancient prudence was also on display in the founders’ reinterpretation of the purpose of the senate as a “purifier” of opinion, not as a house of lords (England), an advisory chamber (Rome), or purifier of the interests of the multitude (the role of the legislative chamber).⁴⁹ In this sense, the “spirit” of the Roman example was emulated in a way that gained from both its institutional and conceptual “content,” as it were, as well as its “formal” greatness as an instance of political action disclosive of public freedom. To borrow from the language of the epigraph to this section, the central conceptual distinctions that animated the institutional structuring of the Roman world were “resurrected” such that replicating the “letter” of those institutions was less important than embracing their “spirit,” thus allowing for a free (though not arbitrary) “innovation [of institutions] on the American theatre.”⁵⁰ And this because, according to Arendt, the American founders knew that “the thread of continuity which bound Occidental politics back to the foundation of the eternal city [. . .] was broken and could not be renewed.”⁵¹ Since there was no chain of causality that could secure the present in the past, there could be no question of “founding Rome anew,” only how to “found a new Rome.”

Completing the analogy, then, we might say that just as in theatre, political action involves a free imitation of action, here understood as emulation.⁵²

⁴⁸Arendt, *On Revolution*, 191–92.

⁴⁹Arendt, *On Revolution*, 218.

⁵⁰Arendt, *On Revolution*, 191.

⁵¹Arendt, *On Revolution*, 204.

⁵²Arendt’s language of emulation and imitation, corresponding to spirit and letter, is likely indebted to Kant’s distinction of modes of aesthetic imitation in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Kant understood emulation (*Nachfolge*) as the creation of an original work of art inspired from “sympathetic intelligibility” with an exemplary archetype (*Urbild*), and as characteristic of genius. Imitation (*Nachahmung*), by contrast, is the replication of an exemplary pattern (*Muster*), typical of aesthetic schools (for an expanded discussion of the modes of imitation in Kant, see: Martin Gammon, “Exemplary Originality’: Kant on Genius and Imitation,” *Journal*

In both cases, imitation depends on the availability of certain reifications, like the written play or documented speeches in archives. But instead of reifying and redeeming those actions in an actual theatre (per the model of non-instrumental works of art), or replicating them “by the letter” (per the “blueprint” instrumentality of *homo faber*), it “resurrects” their “spirit” in the service of building lasting political institutions responsive to the “enlarged horizons of experiences that the event” that the present opens up.⁵³ It is by attuning to the “spirit” of the exemplary, as contained within variously durable vessels of culture (e.g., carved stone, painted canvas, or memorized narratives), that the past is able to “transcend” the causality of history, shed the determinative force of tradition, resist mere imitative replication, and reveal the very freedom and responsibility that resides in the gap of the present *qua* space of beginning. Only examples of free action can do this, since only examples of free action can disclose the exercise of freedom. Insofar as they do disclose that freedom, as the Roman ones did for the American founders, then they may indeed have substantive things to teach, like how to structure political institutions, even if those lessons do not exhaust what is possible.

Although having gone to school in Roman antiquity meant that the Roman example appeared to the minds of the American founders “almost automatically,” they nevertheless turned to that example, Arendt writes, “in all deliberate consciousness.”⁵⁴ In other words, although they were already “cultured” in antiquity, they still had to judge its worth as guiding example in the present.⁵⁵ Insofar as they were required to exercise their capacity for judgment in this way, they were not just actors but also spectators, and the value of the *imitation* of the exemplary as a response to the question of measure in the *vita activa* therefore presupposes a capacity for judging; a capacity, that is, for discerning just what was presupposed in the previous description, namely, what they reveal (their spirit) and how far they can guide us in the present. We may therefore return to the second half of our proposed interpretive analogy between the phenomenal structure of public

of the History of Philosophy 35, no. 4 [1997]: 146–58). Arendt’s promotion of imitation and emulation, however, does not commit her to a endorsement of genial creation *simpliciter*, for she also followed Kant in subordinating creation to communicability and taste (Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 62–63). A consequence of her appropriation of the Kantian understanding of genius as guided by taste is that in the political domain actors can only embark on new beginnings by making themselves understood as worthy to be followed by others.

⁵³Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 221.

⁵⁴Arendt, *On Revolution*, 191.

⁵⁵For Arendt’s discussion of the relationship between culture and politics, see 1961: 208–22.

works of art and public words and deeds (that the meaning of words and deeds are, like works of art, revealed and evaluated by the judgments of the “chorus” of spectators, who are themselves guided by “standards” of greatness or beauty, respectively). Let’s step back, then, and consider Arendt’s elusive references to judgment in *The Human Condition*. Recall, Arendt introduced spectator judgment in section 24 on works of art. The passage, in full, reads:

The standard by which a thing’s excellence is judged is never mere usefulness, as though an ugly table will fulfil the same function as a handsome one, but its adequacy or inadequacy to what it should look like, and this is, in Platonic language, nothing but its adequacy or inadequacy to the *eidos* or idea, the mental image, or rather the image seen by the inner eye, that preceded its coming into the world and survives its potential destruction. In other words, even use objects are judged not only according to the subjective needs of men but by the objective standards of the world where they will find their place, to last, to be seen, and to be used.⁵⁶

If we took this passage as our guide, we would expect the political spectator to not only talk about and tell the story of action, but also judge its worthiness by reference to some lasting “image” qua “standard” seen by the mind. We would expect judgment to imply a vision of the how the world should look; a “measuring” of appearances in order to “build” the world.

Like her mention of the role of *mimesis* in acting, Arendt does not provide much indication as to how we might carry the characteristics of aesthetic judgment into the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*. The most promising clue comes in the sixth chapter, “The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age,” where Arendt undertakes a criticism of modern political-philosophical attempts to “invent the means and instruments” to “make and rule” the world by appealing to what “the art of nature” has purportedly enclosed within man in the singular and that are available through introspection.⁵⁷ In the case of Descartes and Hobbes, Arendt writes that “the rules and standards by which to build and judge this most human of human ‘works of art’ [i.e., the world] do not lie outside of men, are not something men have in common in a worldly reality perceived by the senses or mind. They are rather enclosed in the inwardness of man.”⁵⁸ For Hobbes, they are the passions, for Descartes, the cognitive process. As we can see, Arendt’s criticism of standards derived from introspection (an inversion of her criticism of standards derived from transcendent contemplation in Plato) depends on an implicit appeal to a worldly kind of standard consistent with parts of the

⁵⁶Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173.

⁵⁷Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 299.

⁵⁸Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 299.

passage in section 24: (1) standards must be common between spectators; (2) they are perceivable by the senses and mind; (3) that it is in and through public judgment that these standards are properly used; and (4) that judging by standards is aligned with the building of the world, the most “human works of art.”

The brevity of Arendt’s criticism here of course makes her intentions difficult to discern. A cautious interpretation might see it merely as a rehearsal of what she already said of *homo faber* broadly understood, who relies on mental models and actual blueprints, as well as “objective” standards of beauty, for fashioning use-objects and works of art, respectively. However, this interpretation would ignore the shift in terrain operative in her criticism: she is concerned with political-philosophical attempts to construct a world and not things, and the position from which it is developed is that of the *vita activa* in full view, not merely fabrication, as gained by her elaboration of action in the preceding chapter. Appreciating the distinctiveness of the terrain of the criticism thus allows us to avoid reading this passage as a rehearsal of her earlier criticism of Plato’s use of extra-worldly measures in politics in which there was no mention of spectator judgment or its standards in the worldly, artistic sense, appropriate to the fabricated and dramatic arts, and to the public world of action as we are supposing. Rather, the criticism of standards derived from introspection, while similar to the criticism of Plato, is carried out from the position of the *vita activa* in the modern age. And this allows us to read that criticism as implicitly carrying a positive description of political judgment in a manner consistent with aesthetic judgment. The problem with Descartes and Hobbes (like Plato) is not, therefore, their use of measures as such, but that they use the wrong ones. Measuring the world by cognitions and passions will only ever build machines and monsters.

My proposal, then, is that despite the brevity of the passage we should read it in a strong sense as a place in which the displaced question of measure at the end of chapter four of *The Human Condition* comes, however briefly, to land. But only for a moment. No sooner do we catch a glimpse of the nature of these standards than we are led away from them. But while Arendt affords these only slight toeholds in that text, we should nevertheless risk putting our weight on them for the sturdier ones they ultimately give access to. On the strongest reading, then, the passage is all of: an acknowledgement that there is a place for standards within the highest realm of *The Human Condition*’s architecture, the *Vita Activa*; as a positive, albeit brief, description of its features; and a further deferral or displacement of their elaboration. The passage thus points backwards to the question of measure left open at the end of chapter four as well as to Arendt’s “thin” description of greatness as the sole criterion for action in chapter five, while also pointing forwards, beyond the text itself, into her later writings on judgment, and to the unfinished third volume of *The Life of the Mind* which was be

dedicated to judgment, “the most political of our mental faculties.”⁵⁹ The question of measure threads its way across the chapter joint between work and action and ultimately suturing the extra-textual divide between the *Vita Activa* and the *Vita Contemplativa*.

IV. Exemplary Measures and the Space of Appearances

Although Arendt did not live to complete the final volume of *The Life of the Mind* (1975), which was to be dedicated to judgment, she had explored its political importance well before then. In lectures and essays starting from the mid 1950’s onwards, around the time of writing *The Human Condition* (1958), she recognized in Immanuel Kant’s notion of reflective judgment, as developed in his third *Critique*, a practice of judgment amenable to the *vita activa*.⁶⁰ Her most sustained consideration of this practice is found in her lectures on Kant in the late 1960s,⁶¹ and it is here that we find among her only explicit articulations of the importance of standards in judgment as well as a proposal for how best to understand them.⁶²

⁵⁹Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (London: Harcourt, 1977), 192.

⁶⁰David Marshall, “The Origin and Character of Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Judgment,” *Political Theory* 38, no. 3 (2010): 367–93.

⁶¹This material has been the subject of considerable commentary. See, for instance: Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Judging”; Ronald Beiner, and Jennifer Nedelsky, eds. *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes From Kant and Arendt* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Garsten, “The Elusiveness of Arendtian Judgment”; Peter Gilgen, “Plurality Without Harmony: On Hannah Arendt’s Kantianism,” *The Philosophical Forum* 43, no. 3 (2012): 259–75; Jennifer Nedelsky, “Communities of Judgment and Human Rights,” *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 1, no. 2 (2000): 245–82; Andrew Norris, “Arendt, Kant, and the Politics of Common Sense,” *Polity* 29, no. 2 (1996): 165–91; Lara María Pía, “Reflective Judgment as World Disclosure,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34, no. 1–2 (2008): 83–100; Schwartz, *Arendt’s Judgment*; Cecilia Sjöholm, “Arendt on Aesthetic and Political Judgement: Thought as the Pre-Political,” in *Critical Theory: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Anders Bartonek and Sven-Olov Wallenstein (Sodertorn: Sodertorn University Press, 2021); Veronica Vasterling, “Plural Perspectives and Independence: Political and Moral Judgement in Hannah Arendt,” in *The Other: Feminist Reflections in Ethics*, ed. Helen Fielding et al. (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007); Linda M.G. Zerilli, “‘We Feel Our Freedom’: Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 158–88.

⁶²Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 76–77. See also: Jerome Kohn, ed. *Thinking Without a Bannister: Essays in Understanding 1953–1975* (New York: Schocken, 2018), 523; Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken, 2003), 143–46. It is worth remarking that the problem of standards is a common point of debate amongst interpreters of Arendt’s writings on judgment. Some find that her turn to Kantian aesthetic judgment undermines any satisfactory response to her putatively moral aim of describing judgment as a capacity to “tell right from wrong” since it reduces the normativity of political judgment an ambiguous notion of taste

According to Arendt in the lectures, every judgment requires some “generality” to serve as a “*tertium comparationis*” or “*tertia quid*” in relation to which we can judge the “value” or “worth” of new particulars.⁶³ Without a generality to serve as “third comparative” or “third thing,” independent from yet somehow related to particulars, we would be unable to evaluate particulars as beautiful or ugly, or as right or wrong.⁶⁴ In determinative judgments—the form of judgment proper to theoretical and moral matters—the third comparative is supplied by *a priori* rules, concepts or laws. But since aesthetic judgments, as occasioned by the singular occurrence of a beautiful object and occurring precisely in the absence of rules, concepts, or laws, “the *chief* difficulty” (my italics) in reflective judgment is how to “mysteriously combine the general and the particular” where “only the particular is given for which the general must be found.”⁶⁵ In these cases, Arendt writes, “the standard cannot be borrowed from the particular, and yet cannot be derived from outside it.”⁶⁶ The particular before me cannot contain within itself the standards for its own judgment, since that would lead to its passive acceptance. But the standard cannot be derived from outside the particular, either, for to appeal to an external standard would be to reduce our ability

(e.g., Seyla Benhabib, “Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt’s Thought,” *Political Theory* 16, no. 1 [1988]: 29–51; Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power,” *Social Research* 44, no. 1 [1977]: 3–24). Others, by contrast, downplay Arendt’s putatively moral use of the language of right and wrong to describe the outcome of good judgment in favor of emphasizing how judging politically is at root an exercise of public freedom by which the very space of common concern between persons is opened and sustained, and the boundaries of what counts as political are drawn and redrawn (e.g., Linda M. G. Zerilli, “The Practice of Judgment: Hannah Arendt’s ‘Copernican Revolution,’” in *Theory After Theory*, ed. Derek Attridge and Jane Elliot [New York: Routledge, 2011]). Others deploy the language of “standards” in a broad sense to name aspects of the practice of judging itself, like “representativity” and “independence” (Vasterling, “Plural Perspectives”).

⁶³Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 76.

⁶⁴Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 76. Arendt’s distinction between *tertium comparationis* and *tertia quid* is significant. The key difference has to do with their relationship to judgment. Arendt understood Kant’s regulative ideas of a common compact of humanity and progress towards enlightenment as *tertium comparationis*, and thus as capable of providing an external standard akin to a categorical imperative that could read: “always act on the maxim through which the original compact can be actualized as a general law” (Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 75). Exempla by contrast cannot be so externalized, for like schemata they are “*tertia quid*” that belong to the imagination—“the depths of our souls” (Kant) or “backs of our minds” (Arendt)—not reason.

⁶⁵Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 76.

⁶⁶Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 76.

to “gauge” its very particularity. So, while we are indeed in need of some standard in reflective judgment, it can neither be provided by the particular immediately before us, nor outside the practice of judgment altogether.

Arendt suggests that “the most valuable” solution to the chief difficulty lies in Kant’s notion of “exemplary validity” (*exemplarische Gültigkeit*). Instead of following the letter of Kant’s own articulation, however, which concerns the normativity of judgment’s outward claim on others (that we ascribe common sense to our own judgment and thus promote it as an “ideal norm” for others to follow),⁶⁷ Arendt rather suggests that the normativity of exemplary validity derives in the first instance from a judgment’s guiding exempla.⁶⁸ She defines exempla as “particulars that in their very particularity reveal the generality that otherwise could not be defined,”⁶⁹ and likens them to Kantian schemata insofar as they belong to the imagination, mediate between sensibility and understanding, and make possible both conceptual recognition and communication.⁷⁰ Unlike schemata, however, exempla do not lie in the mind *a priori*, but are the products of reflective judgments: they are particulars that we “judge to be the best [i.e., most beautiful] [. . .] and thus take as how [similar particulars] should be.”⁷¹ Following the etymological connection between the noun “example” and the Latin verb *eximere*, Arendt thereby describes such judgments as “singling out” a

⁶⁷“Thus the common sense, of whose judgment I here offer my judgment of taste as an example and on account of which I ascribe exemplary validity to it, is a merely ideal norm, under the presupposition of which one could rightfully make a judgment that agrees with it and the satisfaction in an object that is expressed in it into a rule for everyone” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:239).

⁶⁸By promoting exempla to the center of her interpretation of exemplary validity, Arendt prioritizes the disclosive-denotive function of exemplary particulars over the communicative-use function of language. As she says in response to a complaint about her own “idiosyncratic” use of language by C. B. Macpherson: “In my opinion, a word has a much stronger relation to what it denotes or to what it is than the way it is being used between you and me. That is, you look to the communicative value of the word. I look to the disclosing quality. And this disclosing quality, of course, always has an historical background (Kohn, *Thinking Without a Bannister*, 461). Exemplary particulars are those originally disclosive sources of normativity that, belonging to a common world, sustain points of normative reference between differently situated persons.

⁶⁹Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 77.

⁷⁰Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 84–85. For critical discussions of Arendt’s analogy of exempla with schemata, see: Ferrara, “Judgment, Identity and Authenticity,” 120–23; Susan Meld Shell, *The Politics of Beauty: A Study of Kant’s Critique of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–2; Zerilli, “The Practice of Judgment,” 126–30.

⁷¹Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 77.

particular so that it becomes “representative” of similar particulars.⁷² Once a table is singled out, it then remains “in the backs of our minds,” “leading” or “guiding” judgments regarding the beauty of other particulars.⁷³ Elsewhere, Arendt summarily describes the relevant kinds of examples as “persons, dead or alive, real or fictitious, and incidents [or events], past or present.”⁷⁴

Since, following Kant, the “validity” of a reflective judgment depends on persuading or “wooing” the consent of others and not truth criteria, whether an example is valid will depend on the extent to which the community of judging spectators share that example (or ones like it) and, at least to some extent, agree that it is appropriate for evaluating a given action or event. It is for this reason that Arendt says that exemplary standards or measures are of a bounded or “restricted” nature,⁷⁵ constituting, as she implies in another essay, the “taste” of a culture.⁷⁶ This of course makes intuitive sense. Political communities can be distinguished by the figures and events that constellate their normative horizons, whether those be founding events like a revolution, the signing of a constitution, or persons responsible for introducing novel institutions and norms. But while Arendt acknowledges that the scope of exemplary persuasion is restricted in this way, we should not read “restriction” as entailing cognitive or political closure, for as always in Arendt boundaries are permeable. It is more accurate to say that she saw exempla as dynamically related to the space of appearances across two general axes. *Vertically*, because (a) the givenness or *thatness* of exemplary objects remains excessive of any single (set of) meaning(s), and thus remains open to new and renewable meanings through reflection from new perspectives (see footnote 31); and (b), because the kind of guidance provided by exempla does not determine the present in the manner of an unambiguously applicable blueprint, but pronounces it as a space of possibility in which the relation between the past and future is precisely at stake. And *horizontally*, because the question of whether exempla are in fact shared or shared in the same way within or across a community can never be guaranteed certain in contexts of plurality. While Arendt acknowledged that communities do share normative horizons constellated by exempla, she also understood that, given the loss of unambiguously authoritative pantheons of heroes, sages, and saints enshrined by a tradition, we are left to choose for ourselves the exempla “with whom we wish to spend our lives.”⁷⁷ Judgment is

⁷²Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 77.

⁷³Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 77.

⁷⁴Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 146.

⁷⁵Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 84.

⁷⁶Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

⁷⁷Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture.”

therefore not only dynamically situated between past and future, but also between the private plurality of exempla with whom one chooses to keep as company and the public plurality of peers with whom one shares the actual world. While we may have good reason to think that others *should* share our exempla and thus consent to our judgments, not only does nothing guarantee this sharing *a priori*, but the presence of the *should* presupposes they don't necessarily. The existence and composition of common sense is always at issue. As such, we remain within the scope of Kant's articulation of exemplary validity as the ascription of an "ideal to norm" to our judgments as an example that others should follow, provided that we interpret this "ideal norm" as derived from the ascription of one's common sense as generalizable exemplary company.

As with the chapter division between "Work" and "Action" in *The Human Condition*, Arendt does not spell out just how aesthetic judgment fits into the political domain. We know, at the very least, that political judgments do not concern works of art but rather the words and deeds of political actors. And this changes the nature of the claim from one of "beauty" to what she calls in *The Life of the Mind* "everyday thought things," like, courage, liberty, or justice.⁷⁸ Arendt does not make this connection explicit, but it follows, and makes good sense of, the nature of political judgments as relying on normative generalities like these: words like courage structure the normative dimension of the everyday language of English speakers, available to and in some way orienting their judgments of events around them. Like the concept of beauty, Arendt understood these concepts as also indeterminate. There is no absolutely antecedent Form or schema that tells us just what courage or justice is. All we have are the revelatory instances given to us by our experiences and cultures of what we have come to call courage. If we were in ancient Greece, Arendt provides, we would have the Homeric example of Achilles for our understanding of courage.⁷⁹ Or, if we were students of French history, we would understand by "Bonapartism" the general dictatorial form of government made exemplary by Napoleon Bonaparte.⁸⁰ Indeed, "many concepts in the historical and political sciences which are arrived at in this way. Most political virtues and vices are thought of in terms of exemplary individuals."⁸¹ By supplying imaginal meaning, exempla render the otherwise "non-appearing measures" (Solon) that we have come to call concepts both apparent and communicable.⁸²

⁷⁸Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 97.

⁷⁹Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 84.

⁸⁰Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 84.

⁸¹Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 144.

⁸²Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 170.

In the first volume of the *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt describes “everyday thought-things” like courage or justice used in ordinary speech as lying “totally outside sense experience.”⁸³ Nothing about, for instance, the stance of Achilles, his manner of running, or the shape of his brow, give us, in themselves, the concept of courage. It is through imaginative reflection that we “represent” his actions in a narrative form, weaving their parts together and fulfilling what we, at least if we were Ancient Greeks, may come to understand as containing, “as in a nutshell,” the meaning of courage.⁸⁴ Our capacity to render action representative or exemplary in this way relies most fundamentally, Arendt implies, on the capacity of the mind for metaphor: in order for exemplarity to function as the “particular that in its very particularity provides the generality that otherwise could not be found,” the reflective imagination must “carry over” (*meta-pharein*) the sensible (the perceivable acts of Achilles) into the non-sensible mental domain of generality in which the concept or thought-thing, “courage,” resides.⁸⁵ At the end of her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Arendt emphasizes, though does not explain, the simile in her example of an example: “Achilles is like courage.”⁸⁶

The exemplarity of the examples that we carry in the backs of our mind therefore represent a unity of the two sides of this metaphoric carrying-over: the exemplarity of Achilles depends on a narrative unity of the sensible, worldly actions attributable to him that, taken together or as a whole, disclose the otherwise non-sensible concept of courage. Exemplary persons and events are metaphorically disclosive of otherwise empty abstractions and thus endow language with practical meaning. If we combine this basic description with Arendt’s discussion of storytelling in *The Human Condition*, we can see how the metaphoric structure of exempla is neither simple nor symbolic, as in scales for justice or hand-holding for friendship, but rather often involve complex relations between the parts of an appearing action and their indeterminate wholeness, as in the myriad parts that comprise Achilles’s courage in Homer’s *The Iliad*, or the many sides of the “crystal” that came to be called “totalitarianism.” Yet while the perception of indeterminate wholeness in exemplary particulars occasions the reflective discovery of meaning from the novel juxtaposition of their apparent parts, Arendt resists the notion that wholes can be finally bound or totally cir-

⁸³Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 98.

⁸⁴“As in a nutshell” is a metaphor Arendt uses in one of her best descriptions of her own thinking process: “I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain *as in a nutshell* the full meaning of whatever we have to say” (Kohn, *Thinking Without a Bannister*, 202).

⁸⁵Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 98–110.

⁸⁶Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 77.

cumscribed. We never occupy a perspective by which exempla are splayed out schematically such that their aspects are visible all at once. Exemplary appearances are marked by an excess, coincident to their very givenness as public appearances, that renders them available to renewed acts of reflection and discoveries of meaning.

We may now return to the four features of worldly measures implicit in Arendt's criticism of extra-worldly measures in Plato, Descartes, and Hobbes, discussed in the previous section. Exempla, we can now see, fit with each:

1. *Exempla are common between spectators.* Exemplary measures are embedded as stories and images in the language political communities use to understand and evaluate actions and events in the present. Where speakers or writers use examples, they appeal outside themselves toward a shared perception. This is what is meant by the appropriate measures having "objective reality," as Arendt suggests. And it is because exempla are shared in this way that political communities can be distinguished by the array of persons and events that constitute their points of common reference, their political "taste," as it were, even if there are differences within those communities and overlap across them. This sharedness can also be expressed in public artifactual representations of exemplary persons and events, as in monuments, paintings and plaques.

2. *Exempla require public judgment.* Although exemplary measures are shared in some sense, given Arendt's emphasis on Kant's notion of *sensus communis* as a distinctive sense exercised through judgment and not a mere set of common beliefs or values, the commonality of the exemplary in contexts of plurality must always be at issue. Exemplary measures do not enjoy the non-communicative authority of philosophical principles but require, for their very reality, expression in public through speech and assent by others. It is only through public judgment, then, that exempla acquire not certainty, but durability.

3. *Exempla are perceivable by the senses and mind.* As metaphoric disclosures of concepts, exempla are imaginal objects of perception that combine the sensible and the conceptual (like, though by no means identical to, Kantian schema). They carry the "intuitive" content that our abstract normative language requires to remain politically meaningful.

4. *Exempla provide measure for how the world, the most "human of human works of art," should look.* When exemplarily informed visions of how the world should look are shared, world-building through action in concert can occur. As in the American revolutionaries shared taste for Roman institutions, examples provide a minimal normativity

necessary for orienting acting in concert towards novel, creative acts of institutions. Insofar as the exemplary are properly political and thus disclosive of public freedom, they will guide world-building towards classically republican institutions.

Conclusion

We do not confront the new from nowhere. But while it is difficult to find anyone denying a fact as obvious as this, it is also difficult to find any clear elaboration in the literature of just what constitutes the nature of positionality in Arendt's thought as it relates to judgment. In this essay, I have tried to show that the position of Arendtian actors and spectators is constituted by exempla, and that these can indeed provide a kind of "measure," "guide," or "standard" appropriate to the world as a space of natality and plurality, provided that such measuring does not resolve to a demand for precision or correctness but involves the more haphazard enterprise of gauging and estimating how the world should look with others in the enlarged horizons opened by the present. As Michael Denny, one of Arendt's earliest commentators and former students put it: "Judgment alone can find standards—from the old German words *stehen* and *ort*, a standing place—around which we can rally and for which we strive that they may prevail."⁸⁷

More still needs to be clarified with regards to the nature and role of exempla in Arendt's unfinished account of judgment and her political thinking more broadly. But with respect to the question of appropriate measure as posed at the end of the fourth chapter of *The Human Condition*, we can now hazard a summation. Arendt's response to the choice between Protagoras and Plato, between man or a god as the measure of all things, would be a mediation. She shows how the appropriate measures for the apparent world of the *vita activa* transcend the instrumentality implied in the Protagorean position insofar as exemplary actions can become representative images that outlast their particular historical instantiations. Properly political examples carry the "spirit" of worldly action, not the wants and needs of men. Yet, although examples are representative images "seen by the inner eye," we do not acquire them by abstracting into a speculative realm of Ideas where their concepts can harden to recursively determine the realm of appearances, but by bringing to language novel actions and events through the reflective judgment. It is through metaphorical insight achieved by the reflective imagination—of seeing an action *as* courageous, *as* just—that the normative concepts of our everyday language "hold the limit

⁸⁷Melvyn A. Hill, ed. *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 266.

of all things” without those limits hardening into dogmatic walls.⁸⁸ Exemplary meaning is therefore conceptually elastic while positively orienting. It encourages new action while giving it partial direction. Adapting Arendt’s favored line from Rene Char, we might say that examples are that form in which the past “comes to us by no will-and-testimony,”⁸⁹ for which we are responsible and from which we are free to begin, again and gain.

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⁸⁸Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 171.

⁸⁹Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 12.

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