

Linda Zerilli

*A Democratic Theory of Judgment*

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Reviewed by Cassie Striblen, 2018

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Weaving together debates in ordinary language philosophy, epistemology, and political philosophy, Linda Zerilli, with substantial support from Arendt and Wittgenstein, convincingly argues that the profound threat to modern democracy is not relativism but the lack of a truly public space in which to share our plural perspectives, exercise political judgment, and generate the common world. Across nine dense chapters and her conclusion, Zerilli criticizes many prominent voices for misdiagnosing the problem and leading us in unpromising directions. She identifies the binaries that tend to ensnare us--objectivism v. relativism, universalism v. subjectivism, cognitivism v. noncognitivism, reason v. affect, truth v. opinion, rules v. chaos--and demonstrates how Arendt's understanding of political judgment evades them. Many of the chapters fit tightly together as a continuous argument, and others apply or extend her core message. Overall, Zerilli provides a historically grounded, intricate, and provocative argument that reorients the debate regarding political judgment.

In chapter 1, Zerilli explains that a common interpretation of the current problem for liberal Western democracies is that pluralism engenders a war of value with no "objective" or neutral standard for adjudication. The typical remedy, then, is to articulate a new standard so that disagreements can thereby be resolved. As Zerilli notes, we might claim this new standard is neutral (it is not, she assures us) or we might embrace subjectivism or ethnocentrism (and then that standard may not be widely accepted anyway). Zerilli describes this as the tension between "neo-Kantians" or cognitivists, such as Rawls and Habermas, and "affect theorists" or noncognitivists, such as Connolly and Thiele. What both views share is the notion that our everyday perspectives are distorted, the former allowing for correction by appeal to rules, the latter being incorrigible. Although Arendt has been interpreted as a "naïve" noncognitivist, Zerilli demonstrates that Arendt offers "representative thinking" and plurality itself as the means of ameliorating distortions (9). Plurality is not the problem; rather, plurality is the solution. As Zerilli explains, for Arendt the common world is not ontologically given but is achieved through sharing perspectives and taking on the perspectives of others. The world appears different to each of us and "this difference in the mode of appearance, the plurality of perspectives on the

same object, is crucial to our sense of realness and thus to the common world" (29). We must have a space to share our perspectives in order to generate the common world. We must also try on various perspectives and move between perspectives in order to understand. For Arendt this movement is the hallmark of "political" thinking in the first place, a process she refers to as "representative thinking" (32, 35). Thus, only by sharing and taking on various perspectives does the world become real and comprehensible; it is the means by which we correct for the distortions of individual subjectivities--we do not appeal to some fixed standard or rule. This is what it means to exercise political judgment. In this way, we go between the horns of the aforementioned binaries, avoiding the near determinism of the cognitivists and the solipsism of the noncognitivists. The real crisis for democracy, then, is not plurality but the lack of a "variety of perspectives from which to get the world in view" (38). Given the political situation in the United States today, with different demographics occupying different "echo chambers" of news, Arendt's prescience is breathtaking. Zerilli's account demonstrates that Arendt deserves to be thought of as one of the most innovative political theorists we have.

In chapter 2, Zerilli gives us the historical background for how Arendt arrived at her unique view. The discussion looks at Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which Arendt explicitly draws upon, including the affective aspects of aesthetic experience and the notion that there must be some grounds for persuading people to agree about aesthetic judgments. The positions of Hume and Locke are considered; however, Zerilli ultimately highlights Kant's resolution of the antinomy of taste. As she explains, Kant offers a kind of "indeterminate" concept that can be used to ground judgment and persuade others to see one's perspective but which does not compel the way a "determinate" concept does (69). According to Zerilli, both Wittgenstein and Arendt embrace this resolution as it "opens up the space for thinking about normativity in terms other than concepts as rules or decision procedures" (71).

Chapter 3 compares how Arendt and her contemporary Leo Strauss interpreted the crisis for liberalism. The crux of the issue involves historicism, which, as a twist on relativism, indicates that people cannot transcend the standards and opinions of their era and that no one has access to the ultimate truths (if there be such). Zerilli indicates that for Arendt, the problem is not about truth and epistemology; instead, the problem is with our assumptions that individual opinion is no part of the truth (yet following Socrates, it is) and that our goal is to discern ultimate truth anyway. As Zerilli notes, for Arendt "judging politically has as its object 'care for the world,'" not knowledge of ultimate truths (110). The goal is to create a common world through sharing perspectives and exercising judgment, all of which qualify as action and as exemplifying freedom for Arendt.

Chapter 4 continues with some of the ideas about truth from the previous chapter. It puts Arendt in conversation with continental thinkers including Heidegger and Gadamer with the goal of demonstrating that Arendt does not jettison truth entirely. Although she rejects scientism (that the standards of truth in science and logic are applicable everywhere), she believes that truths in the political realm, to allow for freedom, must admit of contingency in a manner that logic does not. Chapter 5 is largely a critique of Rawls and problematizes the ideas that within a respectful, pluralistic society we employ "public reason" and the "method of avoidance," that is, we make no comprehensive claims to truth (145). These ideas tend to limit public debate, limit the

possibilities for creating change, and limit our capacity to create the common world, all things Arendt would see as damaging.

Versions of chapters 6, 7, and 8 have appeared elsewhere. Chapter 6 engages directly with feminism and the difficulties of judging cross-culturally. Zerilli mentions Okin, Nussbaum, and others who have attempted to employ a "new universalism" for this purpose; however, from an Arendtian perspective this move is flawed. The application of any "universal" criteria is, first of all, not really neutral, and second, involves subsuming a particular that is effectively logic or math--not an exercise of critical judgment at all. Chapter 7 compares Arendt's and Habermas's interpretations of the protests of 1968. The central concerns here are the definitions of politics, power, will, and the role of "principles" rather than "transcontextual moral standards" in judging events (207). Arendtian principles, which are reminiscent of Aristotelian virtues, are flexible but not inoperative, saving Arendt from accusations of irrationalism. Chapter 8 shares concerns with chapter 6 and involves judging "alien" cultures (the Zande, who believe in magic), describing the views of Winch, Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Gellner. Although it does involve judging, this chapter fits least well with the overall message of the book.

Chapter 9 identifies a problem with the "affective turn" in understanding judgment. The rigid logicity of reason is a threat to freedom, but so is an ungovernable affect. For judgment to work properly, the inclusion of affect must not exclude reason, and vice versa. Zerilli argues that affect is not necessarily irrational: "just because our affective experiences do not take propositional form does not mean that these experiences are nonconceptual" (259). Again, Kant's (and Wittgenstein's, and Arendt's) understanding of indeterminate concepts enables aesthetic or affective judging to possibly count as rational.

In the conclusion Zerilli revisits the idea that judging is not simply applying the principles given by a theory, or subsuming a particular under a universal, or implementing a given rule. It is not that easy. If we understand judging in Arendt's sense, then in order to judge we need to "recover the ordinary concept of perspective, according to which perspectives are perspectives on something--that is, they share a common object and are corrigible by other perspectives (through representative thinking)" (267). Judging involves championing our perspectives (including opinions, beliefs, values) in the public sphere, taking on the perspectives of others, and comparing and revising continuously. Judging involves admitting the limitations of our own perspective while not abandoning our own critical power to judge. Judging requires pluralism, a public space for frank conversation, and a willingness to seriously consider other perspectives and look for what is true in them. We may have pluralism; unfortunately, as Arendt feared, it seems we lack the other components that make democratic judgment possible.

Arendt is such a profound thinker, so often reaching back into the past, that her intellectual horizon can be difficult to see. Having seen that horizon, Zerilli masterfully guides the reader through a maze of difficulties and dead ends, demonstrating how much Arendt (and Wittgenstein) have to offer political philosophy today. Zerilli argues convincingly that the real threat to democracy is not pluralism. What to do about the real threat? I hope that is in her next book.