



## Aesthetics and Politics in Hannah Arendt

Karin Fry

Georgia Southern University  
kfry@georgiasouthern.edu

**Abstract:** Trevor Tchir argues that Hannah Arendt's use of the *daimon* concept helps one to gain insight into how the "who" is disclosed in political action. For Tchir, the *daimon* is used in aesthetic as well as in transcendent ways. My commentary focuses on various discussions of aesthetics and politics in Arendt's work and on her understanding of the concept of genius in order to illustrate that her position on these matters is not straightforward. It is my view that the overarching argument of Tchir's book would be stronger if first, Arendt's hesitancy with understanding politics aesthetically and if second, her suspicions about the concept of genius were addressed fully.

**Keywords:** Arendt, Hannah; aesthetics; politics; genius; the *daimon*; action.

Trevor Tchir's new work is a penetrating exploration of various topics in Arendtian theory.<sup>1</sup> He focuses primarily upon the disclosure of who an actor is, which is connected to Arendt's theory of action, and seeks to link this idea with Arendt's understanding of history and performative politics. He also stresses Arendt's objection to notions of freedom connected to individual sovereignty and how the meaning of political action comes from the community, rather than it being based solely on the desires of the actor. Further, Tchir reiterates Arendt's worries about teleological theories of history and how politically dangerous those frameworks can be. However, the most innovative aspect of this book is Tchir's exploration of Arendt's discussion of the Greek idea of the *daimon*, a topic that has not been explored in any depth by Arendt scholars. This is surprising, given Arendt's affinity with Greek philosophy and her

frequent discussions of ancient Greek thought. For Tchir, the *daimon* serves as a kind of divine inspiration allowing actors to disclose themselves and the world. Tchir notes that the *daimon* has a bearing on Plato's myth of Er, on Martin Heidegger's concept of *aletheia*, on Karl Jaspers' notion of the valid personality, and on the concept of genius in Immanuel Kant's aesthetic. He argues that for Arendt the *daimon* serves as a kind of source from which humans have the capacity to think and act (TPA 7).

Arendt's fondness for the Greeks is well known and she often returns to the ancient Greek world for inspiration. She was able to read and write in Greek and as a teen Arendt formed a Greek reading circle.<sup>2</sup> At the University of Marburg, she studied Classics and Theology in addition to Philosophy and she was clearly drawn to Heidegger's use of ancient Greek concepts in the context of his own philosophy. Hence, it is surprising

<sup>1</sup> Trevor Tchir, *Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Action: Daimonic Disclosure of the 'Who'*, Cham, CH: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017. [Henceforth cited as TPA]

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1982, p. 391.

that scholars have not previously explored Arendt's use of the idea of the *daimon* in much detail, and I found it interesting to have the concept traced throughout her work by Tchir. Typically, Arendt uses this concept in connection to her limited discussion of ethics and the "two-in-one," which is the way Arendt describes the inner dialogue of the self. Arendt often avoided the topic of ethics in favor of addressing politics. However, in "Thinking and Moral Considerations," Arendt describes ethics in terms of answering the question whether one can live with oneself following the act.<sup>3</sup> For example, a person who chooses to murder someone would be forced to live with a murderer after the execution of this deed. Arendt links the notion of the conscience with Socrates' *daimon* and she claims that it told him what not to do but never what to do.<sup>4</sup> For Arendt, one's conscience triggers an inner dialogue with regard to ethical behavior in a specific situation. Tchir traces Arendt's use of the *daimon* example further by showing how often she references the topic, thereby showing it may mean more than what scholars have previously thought. By drawing on the idea of the *daimon* Tchir seeks to accomplish several tasks but primarily, he uses it in connection with political action and the disclosure of the "who." For Tchir, the *daimon* "mediates between human beings of this world and the seemingly unknowable place from which comes the capacity to act and think" (TPA 7). Yet, some of these linkages seem to require a more extensive examination, thus making them more convincing, especially since the use of the concept of the *daimon* is relatively rare throughout Arendt's works. Though I am also concerned about the transcendent element of the *daimon* that Tchir attributes to Arendt, I will restrict my commentary to focusing on the link between aesthetics and politics in Arendt's work and the claim that the *daimon* and politics in general can be understood as closely aligned with aesthetical thought.

### Aesthetics and Politics

Within Arendt's theory, the connection between art and politics is not straightforward and is difficult to discern. Arendt has an unusual understanding of the

role of art insofar as she categorizes art objects as a form of what she calls "work," rather than "action." In *The Human Condition* and elsewhere, Arendt argues that art contributes to building a world of permanence that is necessary for politics to become possible. Human beings must be able to have time outside of securing sheer survival to take part in politics. Arendt's world created through fabrication is lasting and does not need to be remade daily, thus providing the space needed for political action. Art contributes to the lastingness and durability of the public space needed for politics, since art objects can be among the most durable of fabricated items because they are typically not used at all, unlike chairs and tables.<sup>5</sup> Artists can assist politics because poets and artists can preserve renderings of political actions in art. Nonetheless, art remains a type of work that begins with an idea and ends with something durable, making it more like the teleological forms of politics that—as Tchir acknowledges—Arendt is against.

In *Between Past and Future*,<sup>6</sup> Arendt discusses the worry that art will degenerate into a form of mass entertainment and hence run counter to its function, which would threaten the durability of the world. In chapter 6, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance," one of Arendt's critiques of mass society is that it tends to consume art works for entertainment purposes which threatens the durability and lastingness of art and the fabricated world. Here she suggests that the most important criterion for judging art is its lastingness (BPF 202). During this discussion, she notes a traditional disagreement between the artist and the politician in ancient Greece. She states:

The mistrust and actual contempt of artists arose from political considerations: fabrication of things, including the production of art, is not within the range of political activities; it even stands in opposition them. [BPF 215]

Arendt believed that the Greeks admired the life of politics and consequently, she thinks there emerged a conflict with the artist who produced art objects and who was not interested in politics. For Arendt, the Greeks thought that art concerned

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture." *Social Research* 38/3 (Autumn 1971), 417-446, here p. 434.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York, NY: Schocken Books 2003, p. 187.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1958, p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1963. [Henceforth cited as BPF]

fabrication, involving means and ends, and that it did not involve the action and speech of politics (*BPF* 215-6). However, Arendt admits that this conflict is not the entire story of the relationship between art and politics, yet she does not describe in detail what the rest of the relationship is (*BPF* 216). She also states that the thought process is very different for art in comparison to politics, yet what they share is a sense of the public and the fact that the audience judges them (*BPF* 218). Primarily, what both have in common is that they have spectators or an audience who judges their significance (*BPF* 218-9). Because of this judgment process, Arendt states that art and politics are "interrelated and even mutually dependent," but she does not go further in explaining the precise details of her argument (*BPF* 218).

Scholars such as George Kateb and Dana Villa argue that Arendt aestheticizes politics, and Tchir is careful to note that Arendt objects to an aestheticization of politics that is found in Nazism by turning politics into a kind of fabrication (*TPA* 21). Yet, much of Tchir's overarching argument in his book assumes a direct connection between aesthetics and politics in Arendt's theory and he advances the thesis that the divine inspiration of the *daimon* is kind of an aesthetic relation that governs political action and political judgment. Yet, this argument would be stronger if the following considerations from Arendt's 1961 essay "Freedom and Politics" were addressed:

Because all action demands virtuosity, and because virtuosity is characteristic peculiar to the applied arts, the opinion has been widely held that politics constitutes an art. If, as is frequently the case the work of art is understood to mean creative art, and the State is regarded as a work of art, as, indeed, the greatest work of art created by the hand of man, then such an idea is completely false. In terms of the creative arts, which produce something concrete that survives the labor that produced it and is completely disassociated from it, politics are the very reverse of an art...The State is not a work of art, because, if for no other reason, its existence never becomes independent of the actions of men who created it.<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, Arendt again recognizes one similarity between politics and art. She states:

Exactly as music, the ballet and the theater have need of an audience before which to unfold their virtuosity, action, too, requires the presence of others in a politically organized sphere...where men live together in some sort of community. [*FP* 197]

Arendt reiterates that it is not the creativity or expression that causes action to be like art, but the prominent similarity is the necessity of an audience that determines the meaning of the event. Both art and politics occur in public. Agreeing with Kant's preference for the spectators of the beautiful over the genius of the artist, Arendt argues that the audience and its judgment concerning the meaning of the action is more important than the action itself (*FP* 216).

There is some room here to argue for a more robust relationship between art and politics in Arendt's thought. Tchir might want to argue that performance arts are entirely different from other kinds of art works and therefore, outside of the "work" category, which could expand Arendt's view into a different direction. Or, one could focus on the similarities between art and action, such as its publicness and how it can contribute to something lasting or immortal. Further, the word "virtuosity" often comes up in discussions of art and of politics in Arendt's work. This calls for exploration. Perhaps her discussion of history as a kind of story telling or narrative may help bring aesthetics and politics closer in her work. Given her criticisms of the conflation of art and politics, it is quite unclear whether she endorses an aesthetic form of politics. Tchir is more careful than some scholars who fail to discuss her hesitancy at all. Further, he distinguishes between performative arts and other kinds of art, which adds strength to his work. Typically, his description of the actor as being inspired by the *daimon* or by genius of some sort is discussed in terms of metaphor, thereby building a slight bulwark against literal interpretations of such concepts. It might be more convincing if one would develop this argument in more depth by directly addressing some of Arendt's hesitancies at much greater length, or even by trying to create space between Arendt's view and a potentially improved view that brings aesthetics and politics closer together. This would make it clear to the reader that Arendt did not necessarily advocate this position, but her works serve as a useful resource for gesturing toward Tchir's understanding of a better relation between aesthetics and politics.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Freedom and Politics," in *Freedom and Serfdom*, ed. Albert Hunold. Dordrecht, NL: D. Reidel Publishing Company 1961, pp. 191-217, here p. 197. [Henceforth cited as *FP*]

## Genius

In Arendt's theory it is also complicated to conceive of action as a work of genius. The cult of the genius is an Enlightenment idea that Arendt rejects for many reasons, but the main political reason is the presumed hierarchy of persons inherent in the notion, as well as the romantic sense of politics that a belief in genius engenders. In her early work, Arendt speaks about genius in pejorative terms, for example, when she accuses social Darwinists of naturalizing the phenomena of the genius in racial terms.<sup>8</sup> She discusses a link between German romantic intellectual ideas and race-thinking through making common place the idea that emancipation was possible for those who were not born nobles through the innate force of personality (OT 169). Genius was thought to be innate and justified natural privileges, which Arendt deems to have contributed to discrimination and the attribution of flaws to other races (OT 169). Arendt notes that books about hereditary genius were common in the mid to late nineteenth century (OT 179). Arendt believes that at the time, evolutionary thinking was combined with the personal achievement of individual character, which facilitated the popularization of racial thinking. In her book about Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt calls Varnhagen's desire to "make a work of art of one's own life," to be "the great error that Rahel shared with her contemporaries," an error that Arendt calls "a misconception of self."<sup>9</sup> Trying to elevate her status in society through her own creativity and talents as the cult of the romantic genius tended to do it, did not secure Varnhagen any political rights. At the very least, Arendt was suspicious of discussions of the idea of artistic genius having something to do with politics and it is clear she thought that some forms of its Romantic variants contributed to dangerous ideas of politics in pre-war Germany. Given that, it seems to require a lengthier discussion about Arendt's suspicions than

Tchir has provided in order to address them in the overarching argument. For Tchir, the *daimon* has been "variously understood as the genius, voice of conscience, guardian, and birth attendant that accompanies mortals through life" (TPA 6). The connection between the *daimon* and the concept of genius needs to be explored further before it is unreservedly linked to the discussion of how an actor is disclosed.

However, there are some resources in Arendt's later theory that bring some of these concepts closer together. In her lectures on Immanuel Kant's political philosophy, which are posthumously published fragmentary lecture notes,<sup>10</sup> Arendt discusses Kant's view of genius and makes an analogy between action and genius in the course of explaining Kant's position held in his *Critique of Judgment*. She states, "the very originality of the artist (or the very novelty of the actor) depends on his making himself understood by those who are not artists (or actors)" (KPP 63). Arendt seems to link genius to action through the use of parentheses, though it is difficult to discern whether she is explaining her own view or Kant's or some combination of the two. Since she died before writing the third part of *Life of the Mind* that is on judging, it is somewhat unclear what the precise connection is, albeit it may provide some resources to support Tchir's view.

Although various scholars have made assumptions concerning Arendt's thought in this regard, it remains my view that Arendt's position on aesthetics, politics, and genius is contested and incomplete. Therefore, I believe there should be more concrete justification of these connections. The relationship between aesthetic and politics as it appears in ancient Greece is particularly important in this case. It seems to me this would need to be addressed to make a more convincing over-arching argument connecting the disclosure of the agent in action to the *daimon* and the aesthetic genius in Arendt's work.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1973, pp. 174, 180. [Henceforth cited as OT]

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, transl. Richard and Clara Winston, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1974, p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. [Henceforth cited as KPP]