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HISTORY AS PROGRESSIVE, NARRATED AND FRAGMENTED IN KANT, ARENDT AND LYOTARD

KANT, ARENDT VE LYOTARD'DA İLERLEMECİ,
ANLATISAL VE PARÇALANMIŞ TARİH

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Öz

Bu makale, Kant'ın estetiğine karşı felsefi bir ilgiden doğan farklı tarih anlayışlarını incelemektedir. Temel argüman, Kant'ın Yargı Gücünün Eleştirisi'ndeki düşünümsel yargının belirlenemez karakterinin – özünde belirlenemez bir kavrama dayanmasının – tarih konusunda birbirinden ayrılan yorumlara zemin hazırladığıdır. Kant için tarih, zorunlu olarak en yüksek iyyinin düzenleyici ideasıyla yönlendirilen ilerlemeci bir ahlaki çabadır. Ereksellik ilkesi doğa ile özgürlük arasındaki uçurum arasında köprü kurarak, "Fakültelerin Çatışması"nda büyük tarihsel olaylara karşı duyulan çıkarsız coşku ise insanlığın iyileşmeye yönelik ahlaki eğiliminin tarihsel bir işareti olarak işlev görür. Hannah Arendt ve Jean-François Lyotard, siyasi yargının olası bir eleştirisinin kaynağı olarak Kant'ın açıkça siyasi yazılarına değil de Yargı Gücünün Eleştirisi'ne geri dönerler. Ancak ikisinin dönüşü kendi düşünceleri çerçevesinde farklı yorumlarla sonuçlanır. Arendt, ortak akıl, genişletilmiş zihniyet ve örnek geçerlilik kavramlarından yararlanarak anlatımsal bir tarih anlayışı geliştirir. Lyotard ise coşkuyu ahlaki anlamdan yoksun salt bir Affekt'e indirger; eleştirel olanı sanatçı-filozof figürü aracılığıyla estetik olanla özdeşleştirir ve heterojen söylem ailelerinin herhangi bir birleştirici anlatıya dirençli olduğu parçalı bir tarih anlayışına ulaşır. Makale, ilerlemeci, anlatısal ve parçalı olarak adlandırdığı bu üçlü ayrışmanın tesadüfi olmadığını; tersine, Kantçı düşünümsel yargının yapısal belirsizliğinden kaynaklandığını savunmaktadır.

Abstract

This article examines three distinct understandings of history that emerge from the philosophical engagement with Kant's aesthetics. The central argument is that the indeterminate character of reflective judgment in Kant's Critique of Judgment – its reliance on a concept that is intrinsically indeterminable – opens the ground for divergent interpretations of history. For Kant, history is necessarily a progressive moral endeavour oriented by the regulative idea of the highest good. The principle of purposiveness bridges the gap between nature and freedom, and the disinterested enthusiasm of spectators towards great historical events – as formulated in "The Contest of the Faculties" – serves as a historical sign of humanity's moral tendency towards betterment. Hannah Arendt and Jean-François Lyotard both return to Kant's Critique of Judgment rather than his explicitly political writings as the source of a possible critique of political judgment. However, their appropriations lead to fundamentally different conclusions. Arendt, drawing on the notions of common sense, enlarged mentality, and exemplary validity, develops a narrated understanding of history in which the spectator's reflective judgment redeems human dignity through the retelling of the past. Lyotard, by contrast, reduces enthusiasm to a mere Affekt devoid of moral significance, equates the critical with the aesthetic through the figure of the philosopher-artist, and arrives at a fragmented understanding of history in which heterogeneous phrase families resist any unifying narrative. The article argues that this threefold divergence – progressive, narrated, fragmented – is not incidental but is rooted in the structural indeterminacy of Kantian reflective judgment itself.

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¹This article is based on my master thesis, Political Philosophy and Kant's Aesthetics: An Attempt to Read History in Kant, Arendt and Lyotard defended at KU Leuven in 2010

Introduction

Is a rationality claim compatible with history, which seems to be something contingent? The answer is “yes” for 18th–19th century German philosophy, especially for Kant, Hegel and Marx. However, the twentieth century witnessed a series of the most harmful, unexpected events of world history – the two world wars, Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulag, the threat of nuclear arms. As a result of these extreme events, the modern obsessed effort towards the rational ultimate goal was devastated and the political panorama of the contemporary era changed irreversibly. Politics through time turned out to glorify the ideological goal as a historical necessity especially after Marx and Hegel. This ideological dedication drained all the human impacts on the history-making process; human beings turned out to lose their own individuality and just have their roles in realizing the designated ideological, political end. However, this ideological dream ended with the unforeseen, shocking, historical consequences of this political understanding in the 20th century. There comes about the re-realization of human freedom as a consequence; in other words, human beings' freedom in their action, and that is what makes history.

This realization of human freedom brings about the discussion on the crisis of judgment in the political milieu of relativism after the criticism of historical goals. Judgment falls into relativism because the tradition has lost its authority as a common reference point of discussions. This problem of judgment brings us to Arendt and Lyotard in their relation to the Kantian understanding of judgment as a healing source. They are stepping back to Kant after Hegel and Marx, because Kant considers human being as an end of all creation, as the highest goal instead of taking the state like in Hegel or the classless society like in Marx into account as a highest goal. On the one hand, Arendt is trying to avoid the relativism of cultural conflict by appealing to the notion of *sensus communis*; on the other hand, Lyotard embraces and mostly welcomes relativism (Ingram, 1988, pp. 51–52). This differentiation in their interpretation of Kant's understanding of history causes them to come up with different understandings of history at the end of the day. Both Arendt in her posthumously edited lectures, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1970/1982) and Lyotard in his book *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History* (1986/2009) laid stress on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790/1987) as an “other” source for a possible Kantian critique of political philosophy. They accuse Kant of not being aware of the fact that aesthetic judgment is a very good example for a political judgment. The reason why Arendt and Lyotard turn to *The Critique of Judgment* is because there is an attractive treasure implied by the reflective judgment's being devoid of a universal denominator or a concept but instead dealing just with particulars, especially in its emphasis on the primacy of the particular in relation to the universal. The central argument of this article is that the understanding of the

“sign” of history for Kant does not depend on any determinable grounds, and it is because of this point that Arendt and Lyotard can interpret it in line with their own philosophical interests, arriving at fundamentally different understandings of history. The article proceeds in three sections: Kant's progressive moral history, Arendt's narrated history, and Lyotard's fragmented history.

1. Kant and the Progressive History

Kant's progressive moral understanding of history is not a peripheral supplement to his critical philosophy but a necessary consequence of it. Because finite reason cannot immediately possess its full scope, it must actualize itself in time through a progressive movement of self-explication, and this is what makes reason inescapably historical. This historicity, however, does not leave human beings at the mercy of contingent events: the principle of purposiveness, introduced in *The Critique of Judgment*, provides the transcendental bridge between nature and freedom that makes the realization of morality in the empirical world possible in the first place. The cunning of nature, as Kant reconstitutes it in *The Critique of Judgment*, no longer governs history at large but is narrowed to the domain of culture, the external facet of a history whose inner orientation is determined by the highest good as a regulative idea. It is against this systematic backdrop that Kant's essay “The Contest of the Faculties” becomes decisive: the disinterested enthusiasm of spectators towards great historical events functions as a historical sign, neither empirical proof nor metaphysical guarantee, but an indeterminate indication of humanity's moral tendency towards progress. It is precisely this indeterminacy that will allow Arendt and Lyotard to appropriate and transform the Kantian legacy in fundamentally different directions.

1.1. Human Beings as Constitutive and Necessarily Historical Beings

What history means for Kant necessarily has moral implications. What Kant tries to formulate is not just history but “moral history”. However, the morality is not the system of norms we have to obey; rather, human beings themselves are responsible for morally re-shaping the world. This is the necessary completion of the Kantian system. Hence, in moral history there is a progressive re-shaping of the world by human beings. On the one hand, there is a moral demand of reason in us, and on the other hand, there is a material, actual world. There has to be a synthesis to realize morality in the actual world. This is what Kant is trying to do in *The Critique of Judgment*: giving an account for the realization of morality (freedom) in the empirical world (nature), and this necessarily leads to an understanding of moral history which is oriented by “the highest good” in the world.

What is most peculiar for Kantian philosophy is his famous Copernican wonder: is it possible that the objectivity of the object can be constituted in the

subjectivity of the subject? Kant does not create another system of norms but starts with being suspicious about the way to create a norm, as is the case in dogmatism or skepticism. This is exactly what Kant means by critique. Kant distinguishes doctrine and critique in the introduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, saying that critique “does not aim at the amplification of cognitions themselves but only at their correction” (Kant, 1781/1996, A11/B25–A12/B26). Critique is reason’s trial of itself. It is deeper than the doctrinal business. Copernicus revolutionized astronomy by changing the point of view and taking the position of the observer into account; Kant’s critical philosophy takes into account the position of the knower of the world (Kant, 1781/1996, B XVI). According to this new revolutionary method, reason cannot be conceived as a system of universal norms which is not constituted by the subject. A subject has to constitute the universal norms by its rationality and does not allow them to be dictated under ready-made norms which do not arise from his subjectivity. In this way, the very status of rationality is not ready-made but constituted, depending on the spontaneous activity of the subject. Hence, it is possible to say that reason necessarily has a historical character. This historical character of reason, however, requires further elaboration: what exactly makes reason finite, and why does finitude entail historicity?

As the subject must be the legislator of his rationality, he has to become rational, and this leads to reason not being static and working according to fixed norms, but rather being active for the sake of self-explanation. This becoming, spontaneous activity of reason causes us to “assume a specifically historical character” (Yovel, 1986, p. 13). The separation between sensibility and understanding is peculiar to the finite character of human knowing; “reason does not immediately possess the full, though limited scope that it can attain in principle, but must be actualized in a progressive move of self-explication” (Yovel, 1986, p. 14). Hence reason has to be historical to realize its self-explication.

As human beings are finite creatures, they are condemned to be in space and time and understand the world as far as “it appears” to us. However, reason has practical interests (Kant, 1781/1996, A797/B825) to go beyond the sensible world. “Metaphysics has its source in our practical need to find a guiding principle – a moral law, a revelation, a just and coherent nature” (Booth, 1986, p. 165). This is the Moral Reason “that demands that its aims to be realized in nature and the world be reshaped according to its laws” (Yovel, 1986, p. 135). Hence there is a gap originating from our finitude between the sensible and the supersensible. However, “it is an essential end of reason to bridge this gap and to imprint its own ends upon the natural world” (Yovel, 1986, p. 137). This gap between the sensible and the supersensible is not merely a theoretical problem; it is something human beings experience directly. Kant’s

analysis of the sublime offers precisely such an experience – one in which the finitude of human existence and the supersensible vocation of reason are felt simultaneously. Yovel rightly wants us to be aware that “Kant’s analysis of the sublime represents in microcosm his whole Copernican revolution” (Yovel, 1986, p. 131). Within the feeling of sublimity we actually discover in us the limitation, “yet we also found, in our power of reason, a different and nonsensible standard that has this infinity itself under it as a unit,” thus “we found in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity” (Kant, 1790/1987, §26, p. 261). Hence Kant claims that we feel sublime not because it is fearful but because we feel our strength within us. The discovery of the superiority towards nature in us is actually to prove that human beings morally change the world. Yet this discovery of supersensible vocation in the experience of the sublime raises a further question: what transcendental principle makes it possible for morality to be realized, and not merely felt – in the empirical world? It is precisely this question that Kant addresses through the principle of purposiveness in *The Critique of Judgment*, which provides the systematic bridge between the freedom revealed in the sublime and the natural world in which it must be enacted.

1.2. The Principle of Purposiveness and the Reflective Judgment

What is peculiar to the third critique is Kant’s introduction of the principle of purposiveness as the a priori principle of reflective judging. Reflective judgments have no determinate concept available. The search for a universal relies on an indeterminate concept as different from the concepts of understanding. This indeterminate concept is the concept of nature’s subjective purposiveness. It is precisely this indeterminate character of reflective judgment that makes it the appropriate bridge between two otherwise incommensurable domains. So, there is a transcendental necessity to introduce reflective judgment with regard to nature due to the problem of the immense gulf. Kant says that after the theoretical and the practical use of reason, there is an immense gulf “fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, the supersensible, so that no transition from the sensible to the supersensible is possible, just as if they were two different worlds” (Kant, 1790/1987, Intro. II, p. 175). The concept of freedom is to actualize in the world of sense the purpose enjoyed by its laws. Kant says that the basis of the bridge is the principle of purposiveness. By means of this introduction, “judgment also possesses an a priori principle for the possibility of nature, but one holds only for the subject, a principle by which judgment prescribes, not to nature (which would be autonomy) but to itself (which is heautonomy), a law for its reflection on nature” (Kant, 1790/1987, Intro. V, pp. 185–186). This heautonomous principle has a further implication: even though reflective

judgment is subjective, it does not remain merely private; it carries a claim to universal assent.

Even though the judgment of taste is subjective, it has a universality claim within itself. The concept on which a claim of taste depends is the “reason’s pure concept of the supersensible underlying the object (as well as underlying the judging subject) as an object of sense” (Kant, 1790/1987, §57, p. 340), and it is intrinsically indeterminable. Even if a principle of purposiveness is maintained, “this concept does not allow us to cognize and prove anything concerning the object because it is intrinsically indeterminable and inadequate for cognition, and yet this same concept does make the judgment of taste valid for everyone because (though each person’s judgment is singular and directly accompanies his intuition) the basis that determines the judgment lies, perhaps, in the concept of what may be considered supersensible substrate of humanity” (Kant, 1790/1987, §57, p. 340). Kant further says that “beauty is the symbol of the morality” (Kant, 1790/1987, §59, p. 353). By means of the analogy, beauty brings morality, the supersensible, into the sensible world. Nuzzo calls this judgmental activity “a tertium comparationis” about which she says that it “is to be met both in the object and in the subject. Although itself neither nature nor freedom, this term is connected with the ground of freedom in the supersensible” (Nuzzo, 2005, p. 324). Kant further notes that “taste enables us, as it were, to make the transition from sensible charm to a habitual moral interest without making too violent a leap” (Kant, 1790/1987, §59, p. 354). Thus, there is a process of cultivation of humanity, and this is the point where the political and historical implications of the aesthetical judgments become visible. These implications, however, do not emerge in a vacuum: they are grounded in Kant’s understanding of how nature itself operates as a vehicle of human progress. It is here that the notion of the cunning of nature becomes central.

1.3. The Cunning of Nature and the Highest Good as the Regulative Idea of History

Human beings re-shape the world according to a certain end progressively. I would like to stress the fact that “the cunning of nature” as it is elaborated in the short articles “complements rather than excludes the other principle, which puts forth history as a rational project” (Yovel, 1986, p. 141). Yovel argues that the cunning of nature is only a vehicle of political progress and of the rise of external “civilization,” not of history in the moral sense. Moreover, in *The Critique of Judgment* the cunning of nature is no longer applied to history at large but only to “culture,” now recognized as the external facet of history. Thus, “although the content of the thesis remains basically the same throughout its variations, its systematic status changes radically” (Yovel, 1986, p. 141). To understand this transformation, it is necessary to first look at how the cunning of nature originally functions in Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” before turning to its reconstitution in *The Critique of Judgment*.

In “The Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” Kant proposes that the subject of history is not the individual but the human race, and that the “unsocial sociability of man” – his “propensity to enter into society, bound together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break with the society” (Kant, 1784/1963, p. 15) – is what makes progression possible. “The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature’s secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed” (Kant, 1784/1963, p. 21). As Yovel formulates, Kant understands history as not a sum total of empirical events but as a totality of human actions formed in terms of a secret plan of nature; history has two alternative meanings: “on the one hand, Kant defines it as the story (Erzählung) of empirical phenomena born of man’s will and actions but interconnected in accordance with the laws of nature. On the other hand, he treats history as the process of what is told in the story, the process in which the human species actualizes its hidden potential and develops its reason and its freedom” (Yovel, 1986, p. 142). However, this formulation in the Idea remains pre-critical: the cunning of nature here still operates as a general principle of history. It is only in *The Critique of Judgment* that Kant integrates this notion into his critical system, significantly narrowing its scope.

In *The Critique of Judgment* §83, the “cunning of nature” is identified with “culture” which is recognized to be “only the external facet of the history” (Yovel, 1986, p. 141). Kant defines the final purpose as “a purpose that requires no other purpose as a condition of its possibility” (Kant, 1790/1987, §83, p. 431). As Yovel formulates, in *The Critique of Judgment* the highest good becomes “the final end of the creation itself, the consummate state of this world” and “despite its infinite remoteness, it involves a concrete synthesis, to be realized in time, between the moral will and empirical reality” (Yovel, 1986, pp. 72-75). Thus the highest good becomes a regulative idea of history: “act to promote the highest good in the world” (Yovel, 1986, p. 7). If the highest good is the regulative idea of history, the question then becomes: is there any evidence in history that humanity is actually moving towards it? It is in “The Contest of the Faculties” that Kant turns to this question directly.

1.4. The Historical Sign: Enthusiasm in “The Contest of the Faculties”

In “The Contest of the Faculties,” Kant attempts to formulate a possible answer to the question “Is the Human Race Continually Progressing?” (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 177). He says that we are looking not for a history of the past but “a history of future times, i.e. a predictive history” (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 177). Kant says that perhaps “we have chosen the wrong point of view” (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 179) if we look for empirical evidence. Instead, “there must be some experience or other which, as an event which has actually occurred,

might suggest that man has the quality or power of being the cause and the author of his own improvement" (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 180). He is looking for an event that can be a "rough indication or historical sign" (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 182) which can be evidence to the fact that the human race is constantly progressing.

Here, as observers, human beings are "considered only with the attitude of the onlookers" (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 182). The onlookers of the great historical events feel a kind of "sympathy which borders on enthusiasm" and "it cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race" (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 182). Their reaction "proves that mankind as a whole shares a certain character in common, and it also proves (because of its disinterestedness) that man has a moral character" (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 182). Kant says that "true enthusiasm is always directed exclusively towards the ideal, particularly towards that which is purely moral (such as the concept of right), and it cannot be considered together with selfish interests" (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 183). For Kant, history is always a moral history which is progressive and future oriented. There is not only an individual categorical imperative, but also a historical one: "act to promote the highest good in the world" (Yovel, 1986, p. 7), and it is this duty within us that makes the necessary connection between theory and practice. The indeterminate character of the historical sign, however, is precisely what opens the door to the divergent interpretations of Arendt and Lyotard.

2. Arendt and the Narrated History

Where Kant reads the indeterminacy of reflective judgment as an opening toward moral progress, Arendt reads it as a resource for rescuing political judgment from both relativism and abstract universalism. Her decisive methodological move, turning to *The Critique of Judgment* rather than Kant's explicitly political writings, is not arbitrary: it reflects her conviction that aesthetic judgment, operating without a determining concept yet claiming universal assent, offers a more honest model for political thought than any doctrine could. The structural consequence of this move is the elevation of the spectator over the actor: it is the impartial, reflective judgment of the onlooker, not the deed of the participant, that constitutes the genuinely public realm. To ground this judgment without appealing to Kant's principle of purposiveness, which she abandons, Arendt substitutes community sense and enlarged mentality, de-transcendentalizing the Kantian framework and rooting political judgment in inter-subjective communication. These moves converge in her rejection of the idea of progress: without a regulative highest good to orient history, what remains is the redemptive power of narrative, the capacity to turn back toward past events, recover their exemplary weight, and keep human dignity alive in the public realm. For Arendt, enthusiasm is not a sign pointing forward toward moral betterment but a moment of collective judgment that demands to be

narrated and renarrated among those who share a common world.

2.1. The Critical, the Political and the Aesthetical for Arendt

Hannah Arendt is trying to understand the historical meanings of the 20th century – totalitarianism, the collapse of moral traditions, and the crisis of political judgment – in her books. What Arendt wants to do as a philosopher is basically to redeem human dignity by means of liberating its condition of being dictated to universal notions such as progress. She says that "we must discover the past for ourselves – that is, read its authors as though nobody has ever read them before" (Arendt, 1970, p. 22) because "no philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story" (Arendt, 1970, p. 22). This search for a philosophical grounding of narrative and political judgment leads Arendt to Kant, not to his moral or political writings, but to his aesthetics, where judgment operates without a determining concept and yet claims universal validity. It is in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1982) that Arendt develops this engagement most systematically, reading *The Critique of Judgment* as an unwritten political philosophy. Arendt tries to come up with "a possible fourth critique" of Kantian philosophy: the critique of politics according not to his political essays but to his aesthetical philosophy as argued in *The Critique of Judgment* (Arendt, 1982, p. 9). What Arendt is chasing after is a sort of "silent sense" (Arendt, 1982, p. 66) (a pre-theoretical, communicable capacity for judgment that operates not through determinate rules but through the felt response of a community) by means of which judgments are operating instead of a deduction or an induction, the property of aesthetical judgments operating according to an indeterminate concept. However it is also worth noting, as Beiner points out, that Arendt does not make a systematic interpretation of this argument until almost the tenth lesson of the Lectures (Beiner, 1997, p. 23).

Arendt maintains that Kant was "senile" (Arendt, 1982, p. 9) in his last years to write a systematic philosophy on politics. But it is not a problem she claims, because *The Critique of Judgment* has the source as a rough material to shape to understand the political judgment. Hence, the only way to write a fourth critique, namely the critique of political judgment, is to consider the political judgment in the same vein with the aesthetical judgment. From this methodological change, she interestingly draws the conclusion that Kant's aesthetics is more promising than his morality (Arendt, 1982, p. 10), most probably because the notion of common sense formulated in *The Critique of Judgment* better explains the moral lives of the subjects than the narrow morality of *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* for Arendt (Beiner, 1997, p. 26). This methodological shift has a direct political consequence. The traditional hierarchy between the philosopher who knows and the

citizen who acts, between theory and practice, is precisely what Arendt wants to dissolve. Arendt says that “with the abandonment of this hierarchy, which is the abandonment of all hierarchical structures, the old tension between politics and philosophy disappears altogether” (Arendt, 1982, p. 29). She wants to show that Kantian aesthetics, and especially the notion of “disinterested pleasure” in *The Critique of Judgment*, provides the ground for a political philosophy that remains immanent to the human world, one that does not appeal to transcendent principles but is anchored in the shared sensibility of a community. It is also worth noting that Arendt does engage with “The Contest of the Faculties” in the eighth session of *the Lectures*, where she draws on Kant's account of the spectators' enthusiasm towards the French Revolution. However, she does not read this text on its own terms as a political-moral document; rather, she subordinates it to the framework of *the Critique of Judgment*, reinterpreting the disinterested enthusiasm of spectators not as a sign of moral progress but as an expression of the general community sense that underlies reflective judgment.

2.2. The Actor and the Spectator

One of the most distinctive features of Arendt's political thought is her reversal of the traditional primacy of action: it is not the actor but the spectator who is the true political judge. She says that “the spectacle before the spectator – enacted, as it were, for his judgment – is history as a whole, and the true hero of this spectacle is mankind in the series of generations proceeding into some infinity” (Arendt, 1982, p. 58). This priority of the spectator is directed against a long philosophical tradition that has privileged the actor, or more precisely the philosopher-king who directs action from above. She keeps criticizing the Platonic “absolute distinction between the one who knows what is best to do and the others who, following his guidance or his commands, will carry it through” (Arendt, 1982, p. 60). What she found in Kant is that “the publicness is the transcendental principle that should rule all action” (Arendt, 1982, p. 61). Who provides this publicity? “Not the actors or the participators in government” (Arendt, 1982, p. 61), but the spectators who make the French Revolution a memorable event, as “individual qua individual” (Arendt, 1982, p. 62).

The spectator as an impartial judge has a superiority over the actor. Arendt formulates this difference by claiming that the actor is judging according to what the spectator expects, however the spectator is autonomous. She says: “The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers. And this critic and spectator sits in every actor and fabricator; without this critical, judging faculty the doer or maker would be so isolated from the spectator that he would not even be perceived” (Arendt, 1982, p. 63). This elevation of the spectator's judgment over the actor's deed has far-reaching consequences: by making reflective, aesthetic judgment the model for political

judgment, Arendt effectively subordinates the practical and moral dimensions of politics to its aesthetic dimension. When Arendt formulates political judgment as reflective and attributes all the properties to it, she actually subordinates, as Kateb rightly argues, “the practicality and morality of politics” to “the aesthetic potentiality of politics” as she wants to “liberate politics altogether from the grip of abstract, universal truth” (Kateb, 1999, p. 266). What she does is the aesthetization of politics which is “pure politics, politics for the sake of politics” (Kateb, 1999, p. 266). Whether this amounts to a problematic aesthetization of politics – as Kateb suggests – or to a necessary liberation of political judgment from abstract universalism is a question that will become clearer when Arendt's understanding of common sense and narrated history is examined in the following subsections.

2.3. Common Sense and Enlarged Mentality

The notion of common sense is the cornerstone of Arendt's political philosophy: it is what prevents reflective judgment from collapsing into mere subjectivism and grounds it in a shared, communicable human world. To understand what Arendt means by common sense, it is necessary to first look at how Kant himself introduces it in *The Critique of Judgment*, since it is precisely this Kantian notion that Arendt appropriates and transforms. Kant says that judgments of taste that are being singular at the same time represent the beautiful as the object of universal satisfaction (Kant, 1790/1987, §6). Even though this feeling is singular and subjective, it sustains the universal claim. Kant relies on the fact that whenever one likes something and he becomes conscious of what he likes without relying on any concept, then “he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [that holds] for everyone” (Kant, 1790/1987, §6). This kind of presupposition of common sense is necessary for the claim of the pure judgments of taste (Kant, 1790/1987, §20).

In the twelfth session of the Lectures, Arendt stresses the fact that when we represent something which is absent, we necessarily judge by means of “inner sense” so it necessitates “the operation of reflection” (Arendt, 1982, p. 68). She prefers to stress the “impartiality” (Arendt, 1982, p. 69) of the subject reflecting on nature. Without referring to the principle of purposiveness, Arendt wants us to think that inner sense is something common to all human beings. This is a significant departure from Kant: by bypassing the principle of purposiveness, Arendt removes the transcendental scaffolding that Kant needed to guarantee the universality of reflective judgment, and replaces it with the immanent communicability of a shared human sensibility. She says that the criterion which makes us pleased or displeased is “the criterion of communicability or publicness” and “the standard of deciding about it is common sense” (Arendt, 1982, p. 70), not the principle of purposiveness. This communicability, however, requires a more precise account: not every sense is capable of

grounding a shared public world. It is at the last lecture where Arendt introduces the distinction between *sensus privatus* and *sensus communis*. One's community sense makes it possible to enlarge one's mentality (Arendt, 1982, p. 73). Communicability obviously depends on the enlarged mentality: "one can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person's standpoint; otherwise one will never meet him, never speak in such a way that he understands" (Arendt, 1982, p. 74). As Cascardi rightly comments, "the Arendtian understanding of reflective judgment recoils from the sublime (subjective) moment and gives us instead an interpretation of the beautiful in which the object of beauty itself is the moral quality of the enlarged mentality" (Cascardi, 1997, p. 111). This shift from the sublime to the beautiful, and from purposiveness to enlarged mentality, is not merely aesthetic: it has direct consequences for how Arendt understands the relationship between enthusiasm, historical judgment, and the possibility of a shared political world. It is clear that Arendt replaces Kant's principle of purposiveness with "the community sense." Arendt offers a second solution to the problem of how particulars relate to one another without a universal principle: exemplary validity. Rather than subsuming particulars under a concept, exemplary validity allows a particular judgment to function as a guide; examples lead and orient without determining. Crucially, Arendt extends this to historical events: past events that carry meaning beyond their mere occurrence can hold exemplary validity for those who come after (Arendt, 1982, p. 84). It is this function that grounds the possibility of narrated history, the past is not subsumed under a law of progress but recovered through exemplary stories that keep human dignity alive in the public realm. What Arendt understands from the enthusiasm of the spectators towards the great historical events is this general community sense which brings within itself the impartiality underlying the judgments of the actor and the spectator. It is not like the Kantian interpretation of enthusiasm as a sign of moral tendency towards progress, betterment and eventually towards perpetual peace.

2.4. Human Dignity and the Narrated History

Arendt's reinterpretation of common sense and enlarged mentality culminates in a direct confrontation with the Kantian idea of progress: in the last paragraph of the Lectures, she argues that progress and human dignity are fundamentally incompatible. She says:

In Kant himself there is this contradiction: Infinite Progress is the law of human species; at the same time, man's dignity demands that he be seen (every single one of us) in his particularity and, as such, be seen – but without any comparison and independent of time – as reflecting mankind in general. In other words the

very idea of progress – if it is more than a change in circumstances and an improvement of the world – contradicts Kant's notion of man's dignity. It is against human dignity to believe in progress. (Arendt, 1982, p. 77)

Thus, Arendt rejects the idea of progress in history. According to her understanding of history, there is not a linear progression but partial times. By "partial times" Arendt means discontinuous, fragmented historical moments that cannot be subsumed under a single narrative of progress; each moment demands to be understood on its own terms, in its own particularity. The devastating events of the 20th century created "a gap between past and future of such a magnitude that the past, while still present, is fragmented and can no longer be told as unified narrative" (Benhabib, 1996, p. 91). What human beings should do is to inspect the past to recover the unified narrative. "Actions, unlike things and natural objects, live only in the narrative of those who perform them and narrative of those who understand, interpret and recall them" (Benhabib, 1996, p. 92). Benhabib calls it the redemptive power of narrative (Benhabib, 1990).

This rejection of linear progress places Arendt in close proximity to Walter Benjamin, whose influence on her understanding of narrative history is well-documented (Herzog, 2000). In the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin argues that the angel of history – face turned toward the past, wings caught in the storm called progress – sees not a chain of improvements but a single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 257-258). For both Arendt and Benjamin, the task of historical thought is not to narrate progress but to rescue particular moments from oblivion, to arrest the storm, however briefly, through the act of storytelling. What distinguishes Arendt from Benjamin, however, is her relative optimism: where Benjamin's angel is helplessly propelled forward, Arendt believes the narrator can turn back, recover the past, and redeem human dignity through exemplary retelling. Arendt's narrated history, thus, does not deny the significance of the Kantian historical sign but fundamentally reinterprets it: enthusiasm becomes not a sign of moral progress toward the highest good, but a moment of collective memory that demands to be narrated and renarrated in the public realm. However, while Arendt's narrated history still preserves a certain optimism, namely the belief that the past can be recovered and human dignity redeemed through storytelling – Lyotard pushes the fragmentation of history much further. For Lyotard, the heterogeneity of historical events is not a problem to be overcome by narrative but an irreducible condition that resists any unifying claim altogether.

3. Lyotard and the Fragmented History

If Arendt's engagement with Kant preserves a residual optimism, the belief that human dignity can be recovered through narrative, Lyotard's engagement strips away even this consolation. His starting point is the critique/doctrine distinction: the critical philosopher, like the artist, judges without a pre-given rule and cannot reduce his judgments to a doctrine. This analogy between the critical and the aesthetic yields the figure of the philosopher-artist, whose activity is not the application of norms but the navigation of what Lyotard calls the archipelago, a space of heterogeneous phrase families that cannot be unified under any common principle. Where Kant's purposiveness bridged the gap between nature and freedom, Lyotard's archipelago merely assures provisional passages between incommensurable islands, without ever closing the distance between them. The pivotal consequence of this framework appears in his treatment of enthusiasm: by reducing it to a mere *Affekt*, a pathological outburst devoid of moral significance, Lyotard severs the connection between the historical sign and any orientation toward progress. This reduction carries a further cost: it leads him to confuse the historical sign with the concrete historical event, collapsing the *Begebenheit* into a sentiment and dissolving history into an irreducible plurality of heterogeneous occurrences. For Lyotard, the indeterminacy of the Kantian historical sign is not a ground for hope but a confirmation of fragmentation.

3.1. The Critical, the Political and the Aesthetical for Lyotard

Lyotard starts his peculiar formulation of the Kantian notion of enthusiasm in the first chapter of *Enthusiasm* by claiming that “the philosophical phrase according to Kant is an analog of the political phrase according to Kant. But it can only be analogous to the extent that it is critical and not doctrinal” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 2). What Kant maintains by means of the critical method is actually, for Lyotard, saying that “this is the case” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 5) rather than saying “this is this or that.” Kant is taking a stance to see what is going on from a general point of view “to judge the claims of validity of all knowledges (which I call phrases)” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 5) instead of being dogmatic or building systems. This critical stance, for Lyotard, is not merely a philosophical method; it has direct political implications, since the same indeterminate, non-doctrinal character that defines critical philosophy also defines political judgment.

It is this parallel between the critical and the aesthetic that leads Lyotard to his most distinctive formulation: the philosopher as philosopher-artist. Just as the artist produces works according to the indeterminate gift of nature rather than determinate rules, the critical philosopher judges phrases and their validity claims without a pre-given criterion. This identification of the critical with the aesthetic has far-reaching political consequences: if philosophy operates

like art, without doctrine, without determinate rules, without a unifying principle, then political judgment too must operate in this way. Politics, for Lyotard, cannot appeal to a common sense in Arendt's sense, nor to a highest good in Kant's sense. It can only navigate, like the artist, between incommensurable islands, what Lyotard will call the archipelago of phrase families.

Lyotard claims that “the critical philosopher can then say of a phrase that claims to be philosophical that such is indeed the case. But his judgment is not a determining one because he is guided only by a rule of indirect presentation of the object of the idea, and not by a rule of direct presentation, like a schema” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 4). As a critical philosopher tries to give a validity claim of all knowledges, it cannot depend on something determinable as it will necessitate something further and turn out to be an “infinitely regressive research into criteria of criteria” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 2). Rather a critical philosopher relies on the “gift of nature” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 6) which cannot be explainable but leads to us saying that “this is the case.” This “gift of nature” is Lyotard's reinterpretation of what Kant calls genius – the capacity to produce something that cannot be derived from any rule, and whose validity cannot be demonstrated but only felt. Lyotard makes this equation explicit in a later text, where he writes that the activity of “the artist, of the critical philosopher and of the republican statesman” all proceed from reflective judgment – working “in the tracks of the unknown and the illicit,” breaking with given norms and shattering received consensus (Lyotard, 1991, p. 115). This passage clarifies what remains implicit in *Enthusiasm*: the philosopher-artist does not merely describe heterogeneity but enacts it through each critical act. For Lyotard, the critical philosopher shares this capacity with the artist: both produce judgments that are irreducible to doctrine. But if the critical philosopher navigates between heterogeneous phrase families without a unifying doctrine, the question becomes: what is the structure of the space in which this navigation takes place? It is in answer to this question that Lyotard introduces the figure of the archipelago, a conceptual landscape in which the faculty of judgment no longer bridges incommensurable domains but merely assures provisional passages between them, replacing Kant's principle of purposiveness with an irreducible plurality of phrase families.

3.2. The Archipelago and the Heterogeneity of Phrase Families

In the second chapter of *Enthusiasm*, entitled “The Archipelago,” Lyotard directly engages with Kant's claim in *The Critique of Judgment* that imagination bridges the gap between nature and freedom – but transforms it into something fundamentally different. He claims that “the appeal to judgment results from a conflict between faculties... Their conflict is signaled by a sign, an eloquent silence, and by a feeling that is always an agitation, that is an impossible phrase” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 12). The faculty of judgment finds “passages”

between different heterogeneous faculties. These passages, however, are not bridges in Kant's sense; they do not reconcile heterogeneous domains under a common principle. Rather, they are provisional, local transitions between incommensurable islands, each governed by its own rules and irreducible to any common denominator.

Lyotard maintains that judgments bearing on the respective claims of various phrase families (cognitive, ethical, juridical, and so forth) are the work of critique, and he calls the capacities for knowledge in a large sense “an Archipelago” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 12), in which the faculty of judging “assures the passages between those of the others” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 12). The idea of the incommensurability of the phrase families is behind the whole picture: the idea of archipelago “regulates this as if description of differends as differends” (Beardsworth, 1992, p. 73). As Lyotard himself formulates it, a *differend*, occurs when “the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim”, a situation in which no common idiom exists between the parties, and any attempt to necessarily wrongs one of them (Lyotard, 1988, p. xi). The archipelago metaphor captures precisely this condition: islands that cannot be unified without violence. This reconceptualization of judgment in terms of incommensurable phrase families has its roots in Lyotard's broader engagement with the philosophy of language.

As Piché rightly claims, Lyotard interprets the content of the critical philosophy in terms of philosophy of language, thinking that “language can no longer be presented as a unified whole. Rather it is composed of a multitude of different language games which cannot be reduced to one common denominator” (Piché, 1992, p. 152; cf. Lyotard, 1984, p. xxv). Piché maintains that for Lyotard “philosophy does not confine itself to the discovery of the rules; it becomes, as it were, creative” (Piché, 1992, p. 156). What is the consequence of this milieu is then “fragmentation and particularism” (Piché, 1992, p. 158) as what Lyotard exactly wants. What this means for the Kantian legacy is significant: where Kant's principle of purposiveness guaranteed a harmonious, if indeterminate, relation between nature and freedom, Lyotard's archipelago replaces this harmony with irreducible heterogeneity. The faculty of judgment no longer bridges the gap; it merely navigates it, without ever closing it.

3.3. Enthusiasm as Mere *Affekt*: Eliminating the Moral Significance

It is in his treatment of enthusiasm that Lyotard's departure from both Kant and Arendt becomes most decisive. Where Kant reads the disinterested enthusiasm of spectators as a moral sign of humanity's tendency towards progress, and Arendt reinterprets it as a moment of collective judgment grounded in common sense, Lyotard reduces it altogether to a mere *Affekt*, a strong affection that carries no moral significance whatsoever. Lyotard thinks that the feeling of enthusiasm caused by

an event (*Begebenheit*) “is an extreme mode of sublime” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 30), or in other words “an *Affekt*, a strong affection” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 31). What he claims by saying that enthusiasm is an *Affekt* is actually removing the possibility of talking on its moral significance. As Calcagno rightly comments, if we consider the enthusiasm as a strong affection “reason is left out of the picture, resulting in a stilted portrait of mankind” (Calcagno, 1995, p. 366). Further, Lyotard formulates enthusiasm as “on the verge of dementia” (Lyotard, 2009, p. 32), equating this out-of-reason state of mind with the feeling of enthusiasm.

To understand the full implications of this reduction, it is necessary to recall Kant's distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime. The mathematical sublime arises when we encounter an object of absolutely great magnitude that overwhelms our capacity for comprehension; the dynamical sublime, by contrast, arises when we encounter a mighty force of nature and discover, in our resistance to it, our own supersensible vocation. It is the dynamical sublime that carries moral significance; it is the feeling through which we discover our freedom and dignity in the face of overwhelming natural power. According to this interpretation, the feeling of enthusiasm is more accurately understood in line with the dynamical sublime, not the mathematical. What Kant indicates about those events is actually human beings' feeling of the moral disposition towards progress, not just a fear or respect. However, Lyotard seems to consider great historical events as a source of mathematical sublime, a mere feeling of the sublime, respectful but without moral outcomes. He reduces the sublime feeling into a mere sentimental outcome. Hence, Lyotard comes to the conclusion that the French Revolution cannot be proved to be a sign of ethical or moral improvement:

Historico-political enthusiasm is thus on the verge of dementia; it is a pathological outburst, and as such it has no ethical validity, since ethics requires freedom from any motivating pathos; ethics allows only that apathetic pathos accompanying obligation that is respect. (Lyotard, 2009, p. 32)

Lyotard misses here the point of supersensible motivating force that forces us to be ethical. Kant says in “the Contest of the Faculties” that “true enthusiasm is always directed exclusively towards the ideal, particularly towards that which is purely moral (such as the concept of right), and it cannot be coupled with selfish interests” (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 183). By reducing enthusiasm to a mere *Affekt*, Lyotard not only severs the connection between the historical sign and moral progress – he makes it impossible to speak of history as oriented towards any end whatsoever. The historical sign becomes a symptom of fragmentation, not a promise of betterment. The contrast with Arendt is also instructive here. For Arendt, enthusiasm, however reinterpreted, still retains a

positive valence: it is a moment of collective judgment that can be narrated and kept alive in the public realm, sustaining the possibility of a shared political world. For Lyotard, by contrast, enthusiasm is a pathological outburst that cannot be redeemed by narrative, community sense, or any other unifying principle. This difference is not merely a matter of emphasis; it reflects a fundamental divergence in how the two thinkers understand the relationship between judgment, history, and the possibility of a common world.

3.4. The Confusion of Historical Sign and Concrete Historical Events

The reduction of enthusiasm to a mere *Affekt* has a further consequence that goes to the heart of Lyotard's understanding of history: it leads him to confuse the historical sign with the concrete historical event, a confusion that, as will be shown, is the direct source of his fragmented understanding of history. Lyotard says that great historical upheavals "are formless and shapeless in the history of human nature. Ethically they are nothing that can be validated; they fall on the contrary under the sway of critical judgment" (Lyotard, 2009, p. 33). He equates the meaning of enthusiasm as "a modality of sublime sentiment" with the French Revolution as if it is a mere sentimental event. This equation, however, rests on a fundamental misreading of Kant's argument – one that Calcagno has identified with particular precision. Antonio Calcagno rightly claims that this equation of politics and aesthetic judgment by means of a sentimental claim is actually exaggerated by Lyotard. Kant was aware of the fact that an historical sign and a concrete historical event are actually different things, as he claims that the French Revolution "would have to be a cause which allowed us to conclude, as an inevitable consequence of its operation, that mankind is improving... the event originally chosen as an example would not in itself be regarded as the cause of the progress in the past, but only as a rough indication or historical sign" (Kant, 1798/1970, p. 182). As Calcagno notes, Kant "universalizes (*signum rememorativum et prognostikon*) its meaning conceptually" (Calcagno, 1995, p. 367), moving from a singular event to a universal maxim. The Latin formula *signum rememorativum et prognostikon*, meaning a sign that is both commemorative and prognostic, captures precisely this double function: the historical sign looks back to a particular event and forward to a universal tendency, without being reducible to either. By contrast, Lyotard starts with talking about an event as a historical sentimental sign and "confuses the sign with the occurrence, thereby reducing the *Begebenheit* to sentimentality" (Calcagno, 1995, p. 367).

For Lyotard, it is impossible for histories to ever become "history" due to disastrous events as signs of the impossibility of history. He says that Auschwitz, Budapest 1956, and the student events of 1968 (Lyotard, 2009, p. 63) are signs of the continuous heterogeneity of particular events, presentations of the unrepresentable.

Flynn calls this condition "a crisis of criteria" which causes "a counter history" (Flynn, 2002, p. 163). The counter history defines itself in alterity to the established series. It is completely broken: the counter history has no past that can be commemorated, no future that can be anticipated, no present that can be judged, because any such judgment would impose a common rule on what is irreducibly heterogeneous. For Lyotard, this is not a problem to be overcome but the irreducible condition of historical existence itself. This irreducibility is, in Lyotard's broader framework, precisely what he calls the postmodern condition: the collapse of grand narratives that once promised to unify heterogeneous events under a single story of progress or emancipation (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). It is at this point that the full distance between the three understandings of history examined in this article becomes visible. For Kant, the indeterminate character of the historical sign is what makes it a genuine sign of moral progress; its indeterminacy is the condition of its universality. For Arendt, the same indeterminacy grounds a narrated history in which human dignity is redeemed through the retelling of the past. For Lyotard, however, indeterminacy is not a ground for hope but a confirmation of fragmentation: the sign dissolves into the occurrence, history dissolves into histories, and the possibility of a common world dissolves into the irreducible heterogeneity of phrase families.

Conclusion

The threefold divergence, progressive, narrated, fragmented, is not incidental. It is rooted in the structural indeterminacy of Kantian reflective judgment itself: the concept on which reflective judgment depends is intrinsically indeterminable, and this indeterminacy is precisely what opens the space for divergent philosophical appropriations. Kant holds the particular and the universal together through the principle of purposiveness and the regulative idea of the highest good. Arendt loosens this bond and replaces the universal with the general community sense, arriving at a narrated history that looks backward to redeem the past. Lyotard severs the bond entirely, dissolving the historical sign into a mere *Affekt* and arriving at a fragmented history that resists any unifying claim. This threefold divergence maps onto a broader philosophical divide between modernism and postmodernism. As Ingram rightly observes: "Modernists – Habermas and Arendt too, I believe, can be classified under this rubric – attempt to circumvent the relativism of cultural fragmentation by appealing to a universal ideal of community. This solution recalls Kant's own grounding of judgments of taste in the notion of a *sensus communis*. By contrast, postmodernists such as Lyotard embrace relativism" (Ingram, 1988, pp. 51–52).

One provisional orientation, however, suggests itself from the analysis developed here. The threefold divergence between Kant, Arendt, and Lyotard is not merely a historical fact about the reception of Kantian aesthetics; it is a live philosophical tension. Arendt's

narrated history preserves something that Lyotard's fragmented history surrenders: the conviction that the past can be made to speak to the present, that particulars carry exemplary weight beyond their occurrence. Yet Lyotard's insistence on the irreducibility of heterogeneous events is not simply a counsel of despair – it is a warning against the violence of premature unification, a reminder that any narrative of redemption must remain answerable to what it cannot incorporate. The most promising direction for contemporary political philosophy may lie not in choosing between these positions but in holding the tension between them: a narrated history that remains alert to its own exclusions, a fragmented history that does not abandon the aspiration to meaning. Whether Kantian reflective judgment – with its constitutive indeterminacy – can provide the philosophical resources for such a position remains, as this article has argued, an open but urgent question.

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