

# Thinking Between Past and Future: Arendt-Benjamin-Adorno

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## The Benjaminian Moment

**Hannah Arendt** and **Theodore W. Adorno** are known for their exile: as Jewish intellectuals, they both fled the Fascist regime; and yet as poignant critics of modernity, they were only to find that tinges of totalitarianism, cultural hegemony, and total societal control were already imbued in every aspect of modern human life. Hence their shared concern: how to save the particularity of human subjectivity from the sway and ubiquity of “false universals.” Adorno’s “non-identity thinking,” with its emphasis on the immanent negativity of reason, aims to save the particular by uncovering the Utopian moment in the unintelligibility of conceptuality; Arendt’s emphasis on the intersubjective political action and her proposal of “thinking without bannister” also aim at saving the authenticity of human agency from the domination of labor, work, and an individual-subsuming reason. In this, both are indebted to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, whose profound and often mysterious accounts of origin, constellation, narrativity, and salvation all aim at understanding the “elusiveness of the particular”. How to understand Adorno and Arendt’s works and relation in terms of this “Benjaminian moment” – dubbed by Seyla Benhabib (2018) is then the task of my ARIA project.

## Review of Literatures

The popular choice of literature is *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations* (ed. Rensemenn and Gandesha 2012), a collection of paper ranging on themes of philosophy/theory, political legacy, and intellectual exile. But they tend to share some drawbacks:

**1. Acting over Thinking:** they somewhat present a picture of Arendt who privileges acting and simply dismisses thinking. While this is intuitively true in Arendt’s early works, elsewhere Arendt seems to have a much more nuanced attitude to thinking as an intellectual activity (Arendt 1985, OT, BPF).

**2. Separating Theory and Praxis:** they tend to place theory in an either/or relation. Adorno’s aesthetic theory, with his proposed “withdrawal to theory” and the “unintelligibility of art”, is read as apolitical or at best practically intangible. Arendt’s political theory tends to be read as a downright rejection of thinking and philosophy *tout court*, which by default are an individual-subsuming activity. But their account of the relation between theory and praxis is much more complicated (MM; LM).

**3. Kantian Residue:** While Adorno and Arendt are certainly rooted in the German tradition, esp. Kant, the literatures tend to assume that they still cling to the Kantian *things-in-themselves*: their pursuit of the elusive particular is read as an attempt to reject all kinds of universals and mediation. This neglects the rich engagement and critique of this Kantian residue, as well as primary works that present a different picture (GW; BPF, LM).

## Thinking and Remembrance

### Benjamin’s Angle of History

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is **turned toward the past**. Where we perceive a **chain of events**, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The Angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly **propels him into the future** to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call **progress** (1968).

### Arendt’s Interpretation of Kafka

The scene is a battleground on which the forces of the **past and the future** clash with each other; between them we find the man whom Kafka calls “he,” who, if he wants to stand his ground at all, must give battle to both force. Obviously what is missing in Kafka’s description of a thought-event is a spatial dimension where **thinking could exert itself** without being forced to jump out of human time altogether ... the insertion of the man, as he **breaks up the continuum**, cannot but cause the forces to deflect, however lightly, from their original direction (BPF):



### Historicism:

Both Benjamin and Arendt are speaking against historicism which interprets history as a progressivist, teleological, and essentially deterministic. The essence of historicism is “thinking”, which, as “determinative judgment” subsumes the particular under the universal (LM): by the same token, human actions are subsumed (synthesized) under the all-encompassing concept that extends toward the past and projects into future. The abstractness of the concept is only to eclipse the concreteness of the particular.

### Modernity:

Benjamin and Arendt also speak in the context of modernity, which vindicates them from a certain naivety: we cannot save the particular by simply tossing off the concepts and relapsing to the Greek polis (Bernstein in Rensemenn and Gandesha 2012, Bernstein 1986). Thinking already dominates life while political action impossible: impending now is a new way of *thinking*. More specifically, this new way of *thinking* will record the actions that were *unexpected* by the philosophical/historical categories and hence deemed *revolutionary* in the modern world. Thinking is thus given the role of remembrance and historiography.

### Historiography:

By which human being immortalizing – thereby overcoming – the transitory and mortal nature of human action. In the essay “The Concept of History (in BPF)”, Arendt offers an anthropological account of history and nature, disclosing the difference between the ancient and the modern:

	Ancient	Christian	Modern
Nature	Immortal	Mortal	Mortal
Human	Mortal	Immortal	Mortal

1. In the **ancient**, nature or the natural is deemed as immortal. Human being’s desire of *natural* reproduction is the attempt to immortalize their mortal life. Historiography, on other hand, is the humane way of immortalizing the transitory, mortal action.

2. The **Christian** world introduced a reversal. Nature is deemed as mortal, and immortal is instead the eternal human soul. Christianity is marked by ascetism and hope in the beyond world.

3. The secularization of **modern** age means human soul is no longer deemed as immortal; yet the legacy of Christianity equally strips nature of its immortality. Modern age is a directionless age without final ends. As a result, history, no longer able to record the lost human action, becomes conceptualized as a description of processes: that we are all part of a historical process creates the illusion of immortality.

## Actor and Spectator

### Judgment:

Arendt is known for her quintessential reading of Kant’s third *Critique*, as well as her theory of judgment developed throughout her career. In HC, the capacity judge is presented as a practical virtue/Phronesis: the rhetoric skill as well as the capacity to debate, persuade and find a solution. In short passage of BPF, aesthetic judgment is interpreted as an exemplifying capacity of immortalizing action. In LM, aesthetic judgment is equated to the reflective judgment and put in contrast to the determinative judgment. We start with LM.



As shown above, **determinative judgment** starts with the universal, and it subsumes the particular under the pre-established categories. In LM, Arendt identifies determinative judgment with *thinking*. **Reflective judgement** starts with the particular and aims at the “enlarging mentality”: identifying it with the Kantian aesthetic judgment, Arendt argues that when facing the particular, one must come up with new categories to render the former intelligible; since categories are of universal validity, one must enter the intersubjective realm of “appearing”, where one must persuade or be persuaded by others. Both in LM and in LKPP, Arendt takes reflective judgment to be a political/practical capacity. But this poses to us a few challenges.

### Challenges:

1. If we stick to LM, then thinking is *ipso facto* determinative judgment. But how should we account for the new way of thinking that aimed at preserving the particularity of human actions? Is there a change in Arendt’s intellectual trajectory?
2. At least intuitively, “judgment” is supposed to be the genus of reflective, aesthetic, determinative judgment, which suggests that between acting (reflective) and thinking (determinative) is a continuity? How should understand this continuity? What is the relation, as is often framed, between the actor and the spectator, both as *Judge*?

These challenges are widely discussed. Actor and spectator are treated as in continuity (Benhabib 1990), in tension (Bernstein 1986; Yar 2000), or as two completely distinct acts (Beiner 1982; Lee-Nichols 2006). But they all seem to assume that acting and thinking, despite their common root in judging, are nonetheless *qualitatively* different.

### “Kritik”:

One potentially efficient solution can be found in Arendt’s 1950s readings of Hegel, Aristotle and Kant, recorded in her *Denktagebuch*. These readings seem to offer an efficient solution: acting and thinking are one and the same act of judging.



1. The particular is intelligibly encountered with *thinking*, more specifically in the aesthetic judgment and the feeling of the beautiful. As per *Hegel*, the feeling of the beautiful is the immediate identification of the particular and the universal, as well as the placeholder for the mediated content of the universal, yet to be discovered in the current immediacy.
2. The determination of the universal is an intersubjective process in the communal realm of normativity, either in the actual political arena or by means of imagination. Thinking with the universal, i.e., *Urteilen*, is thus at once an action, i.e., *Entscheiden*. **The actor and the spectator are one and the same person.**
3. It is only with the universal and thinking that the particular could be discriminated in the first place. Thinking therefore does not necessarily eliminate the particular.

## Origin and Immanence

### Benjamin:

Benjamin is known for lamenting the loss of “origin [Ursprung].” Yet, his historical materialism aims not at a transcendent redemption. It is this nebulous quasi-transcendence/quasi-immanence of reason that marks his thought: after all, the technique of constellation is a pure *means* of thought, not a romantic revelation of the *things-in-themselves* in their bare particularity (AP, OGT). This Benjaminian idea allows us to revisit Adorno and Arendt, in light of the theory/praxis dialectic we just uncovered.

### Adorno:

In his critique of Heidegger, Adorno argues that the pursuit of Being’s authenticity means nothing but false abstractness in the modern age (JA). Behind this conviction is the full realization of reason’s concrete actuality [Wirklichkeit]:

1. Any immediate experience of the particular is mediated with universals;
2. The universals, i.e., theory, are the achievement of human praxis.

In this, Adorno is beyond Kant and following Hegel. Accordingly, Adorno’s pursuit of *Naturschöne* is not simply the pursuit of the particular without universals. The negation of meaning is an *immanent* configuration of reason that opens up the possibility of transcending the *false* universals, not the universals *tout courts*. The means of salvation is thus by creating tensions between meanings and the irreducible concepts (see “Der Essay als Form,” GW).

### Arendt:

In the preface to OT, Arendt speaks in length about the concept of “origin”; citing Benjamin, she revealed that the exploration of origin is the process of uncovering the unnoticed details and materials, the constellation of which illumines the past beyond the ready-made historical categories. The main body of the book, however, totally lacks the mysterious character of Benjamin’s. Arendt is doing nothing but creating new categories and narratives, i.e., universals, to make sense of the material.

Yet, given the theory of aesthetic judgment, this should not come as a dismay. The “origin” for Arendt is not the Kantian *things-in-themselves*, but the human action. The dialectic of acting and thinking means that action is intrinsically tied up with concepts and narrativity: what matters is the *kind* of narrative: the narrative that forgets or the narrative of remembrance.

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