

Linda M. G. Zerilli. *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*. University of Chicago Press 2016. 400 pp. \$105.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780226397849); \$35.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780226397986).

The central concern of the book is the problem of judging in face of deep value pluralism of ‘incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines’ (2) that are religious, moral, or philosophic in nature. This includes the problem of how to judge ‘whose criteria shall decide?’ or ‘how can we decide which judgement is correct?’ (2). The book does not provide ‘a definitive democratic theory of judgment’ nor a “‘how to judge” manual’ (xii). Rather, Zerilli’s attempt is ‘to explore how Arendt might help us reframe the problem of judgment’ (xii) in contemporary democratic societies and in feminist political theory. The book succeeds in doing that to a large extent.

Zerilli’s main anchor for the task of reframing the problem of judging is Hannah Arendt but she also weaves in prior engagements to resolve the issue by several thinkers in different contexts: John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas; Leo Strauss; Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Peter Winch; Susan Okin and Martha Nussbaum; Ernesto Grassi; and many more. Across the nine chapters of the book, Zerilli demonstrates how Arendt’s understanding of political judgment can help us to think beyond the binaries of truth/opinion, objectivism/relativism, universalism/subjectivism, reason/affect and cognitivism/non-cognitivism.

The author credits Arendt with coming up with a novel account of judging as a political capacity common to ‘ordinary democratic citizens and not just elites with special knowledge abilities’ (xi). This seems doubtful as Kant can also be seen as a forerunner of this thought in his defense of every man’s capacity for freedom. However, it does not impact her main argument in any way.

Two opposing contemporary ways of posing the democratic problem of judgment are reviewed. On the one side of the spectrum, we have the views of Neo-Kantians like Habermas and Rawls and on the other side we have affect theorists like William Connolly, Leslie Paul Thiele, and John Protevi. The Neo-Kantians and cognitivists hold that rational adjudication or validity claims are the best ways to pose the problem of judgment. These deliberative approaches assume that intercultural value conflicts can be resolved by discursive argumentation once the ground rules for engaging in public debate are clear. Zerilli regards ‘this otherwise reasonable concern with adjudication’ and the ‘whole question of validity itself’ as a ‘kind of theoretical obsession that might lead us to misunderstand what is at stake in judging politically’ (xii).

Unlike the strict cognitivism of Neo-Kantians, the affect theorists pose the problem of judgment as a ‘modulated expression of the already primed, preconscious dispositions that are formed through the complex interaction of the social and the somatic’ (3). Zerilli finds that they not only distance themselves from the strict cognitivism of the Neo-Kantians but also overlook ‘more familiar accounts of feeling, emotion, or sentiment that play a role in many feminist strands of affect theory’ (3) and feminist critiques of deliberative models. They argue against such accounts by saying that they are too tightly bound to the idea of political subject as a rational cognitive subject. However, they propose that affect is a distinct layer of experience that is both prior to and beneath language and intentional consciousness. Affect is seen as an irreducibly bodily and autonomic force that shapes conscious judgment without the subject’s awareness.

Zerilli finds that these two distinct ways of posing the democratic problem of judgment share ‘a deep suspicion of our ordinary modes of judging’ and they are grounded in ‘our affective and parochial attachments that impair our ability to get the world in view’ (4). They view ordinary modes of judging as ‘intrinsically partial and distorting especially when it comes to matters of common concern’ (4). Each of them offers a mechanism to mitigate, if not correct, this distortion. They share

a sense that our judging criteria are not good enough and are in need of some sort of correcting supplement. This corrective tends to be construed in increasingly neutral and minimal terms.

The distrust in judging is rooted in the distrust of the intrinsic partiality and affective character of the perspective with which we view the world. It gives rise to false beliefs and ideological blind spots that restrict our capacity to judge critically and reflectively. Zerilli stresses that this distortion is not an issue but the question: ‘whether *qua* human perspectives they always distort, rooted as they are in our subjective and affective modes of apprehending the world’ (4). Adopting the understanding of perspective from renaissance paintings, she proposes: ‘whatever distortions arise from viewing the object from one perspective can be corrected by viewing the same object from another perspective’ (5). Judging rightly would involve correcting for distortions in this way. Zerilli admits that the plurality of perspectives and ‘affective interpretations’ is also the greatest threat to democracy as they offer more opportunities to distort. Both the search for neutral rational grounds for democratic justifications and the denial of any rational justification of a judgment are rooted in the suspicion that perspective and affective interpretations are distorting and not corrigible by other perspectives. This is linked with the problem of how we view perspective as “merely” subjective in our claims to what is objective, or think of subjectivity as limiting our access to how things stand in the world.

Zerilli does a remarkable job in reflecting on Arendt’s observations that political judgment is political not because its object is political things but because of ‘the means or process by which judgment proceeds’ (7). What makes something political is not the referent (object) of judging but the particular mode (form) of judging’. She is concerned about the process by which something that was not already considered political (housework, sexuality, academic hiring) can be seen and judged as such. The ability for judgment arises when one is able ‘to see things not only from one’s own point of view but in the perspective of those who happen to be present’ (8). The author clarifies that the problem for Arendt was ‘how it is that citizens *get certain objects into view as objects of judging at all*. That is the problem of what she calls “the common world”’ (9). The point was ‘not to exclude the relevance of cognition to politics but to emphasize the reflective and affective character of all judging, aesthetic and empirical’ (9). It was a matter of bringing new objects for judgments but also of judging politically those that are already in our view. She shifts our attention to the Arendtian question of ‘what it means to have a world in common, a world in which so-called value differences present themselves, and are taken up, not as mere preferences but as politically relevant “objects” for judgment, matters of common concern’ (10).

The book presents us with an important way of thinking about the relationship of evaluative thought to the world. Zerilli’s democratic theory takes sensibility and affective response as world-building. It calls for a way of talking about evaluative facts as something that we do not cognize. It focuses on voice rather than rules or criteria as standard of correctness, i.e., ‘our mastery of speaking in particular public contexts’ (25). She regards ‘the philosophical problem of objectivity understood in political terms of worldlessness’ as ‘a crisis in the variety of perspectives from which to get the world in view, not the absence of a standard’ (28). She also claims that ‘articulation of multiple perspectives does not in itself guarantee critical and reflective judgment’ but it will enrich one’s perspective ‘as a whole of what is real’ (38). It is not mere accumulation of perspectives ‘learning how to *count* these other perspectives as revealing something *about* the world’ (39). It calls for a ‘rational revision of our beliefs ... by seeing them as connected with our unjust social practices, rather than as the consequence of our flawed psychology’ (40). We must free ourselves from the thought that perspectives always distort. The problem is not that we do not have enough perspectives but the more pressing concern is to listen to and correct each others’ perspectives to understand the human world. She admits that ‘judging cannot wholly evade the question of what counts as real or

objective, perhaps as true, even if the question cannot be answered adequately in the manner of validity thinkers' (xiii).

At the end of the day, Zerilli's reframing of the problem of democratic judgment comes down to an urge to open our eyes to the perspectives of others, who do not necessarily share our worldview and yet very much count as an objective reality of our world. However, it seems practically unlikely in the face of communities, countries and continents that share an unequal political power differential. It is easy to choose not to listen or to stick to a distorted perspective when it is profitable or if it does not disturb one's composure especially, in situations when the others are in an unprivileged position.

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