**////Title: Arendt’s Ethics of Otherness: Rethinking How We See Other People**

**////Standfirst:**

The 20th Century philosopher Hannah Arendt grounded ethics in aesthetics because she viewed art as a way of understanding how the world appears to different people. In her recent work, Professor Andreea Deciu [day-chew] Ritivoi [ree-tee-voy] of Carnegie Mellon University highlights Arendt’s rich repertoire of literary writings, as she believes that they deserve to be considered alongside other popular ethical works. Professor Ritivoi shows how Arendt’s unique contribution identifies the obstacles facing ‘human togetherness’, so that we can find ways to overcome them.

**////Main text:**

Born in Germany in 1906, Hannah Arendt was a political philosopher and Holocaust survivor. After Adolf Hitler came to power, Arendt was arrested and briefly imprisoned by the Gestapo, before fleeing the country, later settling in Paris. When Germany invaded France in 1940, she was forced once again to escape, this time making her way to New York, where she remained for the rest of her life. While living in New York, she became a writer and editor, and her contributions continue to influence political and philosophical theorists today.

Arendt’s interest in literature was partly inspired by her reading of well-known German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, particularly the role played by aesthetic representation in ethical and political judgment.

Art, and particularly literary art, invites us into the minds and world of others, offering an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s standpoint. In many respects, Arendt’s work is even more relevant now than when it first appeared in the 20th Century, as people around the world ignore others’ standpoints and hold on to their own.

In a recent paper published in the journal *Humanities*, Professor Ritivoi provides a comprehensive review of Arendt’s writing about literature. Professor Ritivoi wants Arendt’s philosophical commentary on literary writings to be considered alongside her mainstream philosophical work, and most importantly, for Arendt’s ethics and literature to be kept alive for the next generation of readers.

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Arendt belonged to the Central European Jewish community that experienced devastating suffering and loss during the Holocaust, because they were branded with otherness. For Arendt, the experience of otherness and difference was deeply connected to a struggle for survival in the face of extreme, annihilating violence. Arendt understood the toll that political struggles took on people’s lives and learned from her own personal experience. She also learned how literature represents these struggles and the moral and political phenomena underlying them.

As described in Professor Ritivoi’s paper, much of Arendt’s philosophical and political work was dedicated to understanding the obstacles facing tolerance and respect for difference, so that she could suggest ways for us to overcome them. Arendt connected ethical judgment with aesthetic appreciation because she viewed aesthetic representation – and especially literary representation – as a way of understanding how the world appears to different human beings.

To recognise and respect ‘otherness’, we must understand another person’s standpoint and see how it came about, as well as what beliefs and values it makes possible. Allowing the imagination to ‘visit’ another person’s world, as Arendt put it, was important because it could recover marginalised or repressed perspectives.

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Arendt was inspired by her reading of Kant’s political philosophy, especially around his concept of enlarged thinking, which is an understanding informed by looking at the world from a variety of standpoints. The foundation of public and political morality, for both Kant and Arendt, lies not in adherence to norms but in perspective-taking. At the core of Arendt’s ethics of otherness is that we should not project ourselves onto other people by positing similarities, nor try to assume an abstract view from nowhere.

Yet, to approach others with an eagerness to understand their viewpoint is not the same as approaching them compassionately or emphatically. Professor Ritivoi reveals that Arendt was sceptical of compassion, which she described as the ‘most devastating passion’. Arendt reminded readers that the hungry men and women of the French Revolution did not have to understand different perspectives on the shortcomings of a corrupt government in power at the time. They felt the same pain but each of them experienced it individually.

According to Arendt, their compassion was not an enlarged thinking because it did not require an imaginative reconstruction of each other’s standpoint. Arendt fiercely defended the view that we must create a bond with others rather than merely notice them from a distance, and we must acknowledge their presence rather than merely their existence.

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Professor Ritivoi explains that Arendt was consistently preoccupied with questions of belonging and otherness, which impacted her own life as she was caught into the political tragedy of the 20th century. Her identity was anchored in her Jewishness, and in turn that of a political prisoner, an enemy alien, and a stateless person. She lived first-hand the repression of otherness when she was arrested by the Gestapo for participating in anti-fascist political activities, and later when she was an enemy alien in France.

Through several countries and two continents, Arendt followed the path of the ultimate figure of otherness – the refugee. Recent tragic deaths in crossings between the UK and France, as migrants from far and wide attempt to flee desperate situations to find a new home, reveal to us the anguish of being reduced to otherness through the identity stamp in a passport.

In 1975 and at the age of 69, Arendt died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving her last work unfinished. In a previous book ‘The Human Condition’, Arendt poignantly wrote that for humans living together in the world, it is like people sitting around a table, with ‘those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.’

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Reading (with) Hannah Arendt: Aesthetic Representation for an Ethics of Alterity,’ from Humanities*.* <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8040155>

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