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Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)

In a 1964 interview for German television Günther Gaus introduces his guest as a political philosopher. Hannah Arendt interrupts to explain that she does not belong to the circle of philosophers. She has said goodbye to philosophy once and for all and wants to look at politics with eyes unclouded by philosophy. If she can be said to have a profession it is, rather, political theory. Arendt, daughter to secular Jewish parents, studied phenomenological and existentialist philosophy in Weimar Germany with Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger (with whom she had a brief affair). In 1933 she fled Germany for Paris. Arendt's disillusionment with philosophy was no doubt due in part to her dismay at Heidegger's support for the Nazi regime while rector of the University of Freiburg from 1933-1934. When war broke out with Germany, she was briefly interned as an enemy alien in France before emigrating to the United States in 1941. Arendt made her name as a political theorist in the United States after the war through her writings on totalitarianism, violence, the public sphere, revolution and civil disobedience. She coined the controversial phrase, "the banality of evil," to characterize the thoughtlessness of Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, whose trial in Jerusalem she reported on for the *New Yorker* in 1961.

Arendt's contribution to political theory can be encapsulated in terms of her conception of the political. In identifying politics with public freedom and the disclosure of a 'world' or social reality, the political becomes an evaluative term according to which actions and modes of thought can be criticized as unpolitical, apolitical or anti-political. According to the contemporary liberal philosophy, political community has an instrumental value insofar as it secures for its members their rights to life, liberty and property. Politics refers to the strategic

interaction (within limits set by the state) that determines who gets, what where when and how. And political philosophy is properly concerned with specifying the principles of justice according to which the benefits and burdens of social cooperation should be distributed in a well-ordered society. Hannah Arendt characterizes this as an anti-political view of politics. For her, politics does not properly concern strategic competition or cooperative interaction for private gain but rather enacting public freedom by acting in concert. The purpose of political community is not to secure private freedoms. Rather it has an intrinsic value insofar as it establishes a space of appearances within which we can achieve public recognition and constitute a shared social reality. And the role of the political theorist is not to lay down the laws that are to provide a framework for political action but to judge the significance of political events for the world she or he shares with others. These themes can be traced in Arendt's discussion of the right to have rights, her political anthropology and the theory of judgment she was working on in the final years of her life.

The right to have rights

According to Arendt the world became aware of a right to have rights when it was confronted in the interwar period by a new category of human beings who had been deprived *en masse* of their citizenship and as such were forced to live outside all legal structures. The predicament of stateless people was not that their human rights had been violated. Rather, they found themselves in a situation of rightlessness. According to the natural law tradition we are supposed to possess universal human rights by virtue of our common human nature and irrespective of our membership in particular political communities. The legitimacy of the state rests on the extent to which it recognizes these universal human rights and secures their enjoyment within a determinate political community. Yet the predicament of stateless people seemed to show the opposite. It was only by virtue of their citizenship that individuals could

be said to have any rights at all. In the modern world, to be forced out of political community was effectively to be expelled from humanity. Those deprived of their home and legal status in one state found themselves in concentration camps in the states to which they fled. As Arendt put it, the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.

Arendt describes the experience of rightlessness in terms of the loss of a place in the world in which one's opinions might be significant and one's actions effective. This twofold deprivation corresponds to those two traits in terms of which human nature has traditionally been understood. For Aristotle, to be human was to be both a speaking animal (capable of distinguishing between right and wrong) and a political animal (that could realize its nature only by participating in political community). In describing the dehumanization of stateless people, Arendt radicalizes Burke's critique of human rights, insisting that we depend on political institutions not just for recognition of our rights but for recognition of our humanity.

Arendt's analysis of the perplexities of the rights of man is aporetic. On the one hand, Arendt invokes Burke to critique the very idea of human rights as grounded in an abstract conception of the human. For Arendt, there is no such thing as an unchanging human nature, a universal essence that commands that moral respect on which human rights are grounded. By nature human beings are fundamentally different and unequal. We become equal only as members of a political community. On the other hand, however, Arendt invokes the right to have rights as a primordial human right: the right never to be excluded from political community. But this leads to a puzzle. If human rights can be said to exist only insofar as they are the product of political association, what is the ground of the right to have rights? If to be deprived of citizenship is to be rightless, on what basis might a stateless person claim a right to have rights? Arendt's analysis rules out understanding the right to have rights as a pre-political moral right to a set of legal rights. Rather, the right to have rights is best understood as proto-political. It refers to a fundamental presupposition without which politics is not

possible and the violation of which evinces an anti-political politics. Indeed, Arendt defines the newly recognized crime against humanity as the violation of precisely this right.

The space of appearances

Arendt's analysis of the perplexities of the rights of man presupposes the Aristotelian distinction between mere life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios politikos*) that underpins her analysis of politics in *The Human Condition*. Here she argues that the dignity of politics depends on the constitution of a space of appearances in which individuals can realize their humanity through public action and speech (*bios politikos*). She writes approvingly of the Athenian view of politics as agonistic, involving a struggle to achieve excellence by participating in a public contest among equals. The Greeks provide an insight into a basic mode of being in the world whereby human beings are able to overcome the futility of mere biological existence (*zoe*) and the meaninglessness of instrumental rationality through a struggle for public recognition. Through this struggle, individuals both distinguish themselves in their singularity and disclose a shared social reality. Moreover, individuals enact their freedom by initiating something new. The purpose of political community is to preserve a space of appearances in which human freedom can be realised.

Arendt's revival of an idealized vision of the Athenian polis can appear anachronistic and anti-modern. Yet Arendt does not hold up the classical view of political community as a model for modernity. Rather she turns to the Greeks to provide a political anthropology, which plays a role in her political theory analogous to that of the state of nature in social contract theory. Like other existentialists, such as Sartre, Arendt debunks the idea of human nature while nonetheless insisting there are certain universal conditions that shape human experience. In particular, she traces three modes of activity (labour, work and action) that correspond to three basic conditions that define human existence (life, worldliness and

plurality). We labor out of necessity in order to sustain and reproduce life (*zoe*). Beyond satisfying the needs of the body, labor remains futile, caught in the endless natural cycles of production and consumption. The activity that redeems labor from this futility is work. Work (*poiesis*) involves fabrication of material objects that provide a measure of permanence to human existence by constructing a world of things to house a culture. Since it is concerned with fashioning things from nature according to a given end, work entails an instrumental rationality. But this means that work cannot establish meaning because it determines the value of things only as means toward further ends. Action (*praxis*) redeems work from the predicament of meaninglessness because it is an end in itself. Through acting and speaking in public, human beings invest the material world fabricated through work with significance and establish a web of human relationships. Action presupposes plurality since it is only because the world appears differently according to the many perspectives that individuals bring to bear on it that politics is possible at all. The end of politics is the disclosure of an inter-subjective world from the plurality of opinions that emerge when people gather to speak and act in concert.

Arendt turns to the Greeks to recover the primordial experience of action in order to critique the modern tendency to misconstrue politics in terms of work (liberalism) or labour (Marxism). Moreover, she describes the anti-political politics of totalitarianism in terms of this same misidentification of politics with labor (bio-politics) and work (the attempt to remake society according to the logic of an idea). Such an anti-political politics is driven by resentment of human plurality. For it treats society in the same way as nature, to be improved and reshaped in the image of an ideal. Arendt's metaphor of political community as a space of appearance provides a counter vision to the Nazi death camps, which she describes as holes of oblivion. The concept of the political, on this account, refers to the mode of acting in concert through which this space of appearances is brought into existence and the commonness of the

social world is disclosed. While the political depends on institutions for its preservation, the space of appearances is primordially dependent on political action: it is there wherever men and women come together to act and speak in public but it begins to disappear with each individual's withdrawal from the public realm. If the right to have rights can be said to have a 'ground', then, it is in this space of appearances which is, in an important sense, prior to institutions.

Reflective judgment

Although Arendt was deeply concerned with what we often now describe as the grave human rights violations of the twentieth century, it is striking that she resists couching her own critique of modern politics in terms of rights. This reticence is best understood in terms of her desire to look on politics with eyes unclouded by philosophy. A political theory of human rights would adopt precisely the legislative perspective that she attributes to the tradition of philosophy. For Arendt, the philosophical tradition since Plato has been animated by a resentment of the political realm in which the necessary truth (episteme) sought by the philosopher and arrived at through careful reasoning becomes one contingent opinion (doxa) among others. This has led philosophers since Plato to understand their role on the model of the wise legislator who would establish through reason the fundamental principles according to which the polity should be organized. Arendt rejects this legislative political philosophy as anti-political because it views plurality as problem to be managed rather than a condition of possibility for realizing our humanity. Rather than recognizing the dignity of politics, such a philosophy seeks to subordinate the freedom of action to the compulsion of reason.

In turning her attention to judgment in her later work, Arendt sought to develop a political theory that was not a philosophy of right. While Arendt identifies Kant's practical philosophy with the legislative mode with which she takes issue, she turns to his theory of

aesthetic judgment to recuperate what she takes to be Kant's unwritten political theory. For Arendt, aesthetic judgment and political judgment are closely related because they aim to derive the general concept from the particular rather than subsuming the particular under a pre-given rule. This is crucial if we are to understand the significance of events rather than assimilating them under our received categories of understanding. Reflective judgment involves the mental operations of representation and reflection. Through representative thinking we overcome the immediate subjectivity of direct perception by transforming what we want to judge into a thought object. The impartiality achieved through representative thinking differs from the universality sought by the philosopher since this it is achieved by imagining the object from a manifold of partial perspectives of significantly situated others. In representing the thought object from a multiplicity of perspectives, we are liberated from the private conditions that constrain our own subjective response.

The impartiality that is achieved through representative thinking prepares the way for reflection by which we combine the particular with the general. In Arendt's view, all of our political concepts originate in a particular historical incident, which then becomes exemplary so that we perceive in this particular what is valid for more than one case. Since political theory is properly concerned with judging the significance of unprecedented events, a particular is given for which a general needs to be found: the particular must be *brought to* rather than *subsumed under* a concept. This is possible by way of example, according to which an event or act can be taken to exemplify a general principle so that it discloses generality without surrendering its particularity. In saying, for instance, that 'courage is like Achilles', we refer to a general aspect of human experience without abstracting this entirely from the particular circumstances in which it appeared. In judging in this way we appeal to common sense (or *sensus communis*) which we share with others, which refers not simply to existing standards and prejudices but our shared sense of the world. As such, reflective

judgment does not merely confirm common sense but reconstitutes it by reinventing existing categories or deriving new concepts for making sense of the world we share in common. This is precisely what Arendt aims to do in her discussion of the unprecedented situation of stateless people and what it reveals about our modern political situation.

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See also Agonism, Modernity, Phenomenology, Power, Public Sphere, Totalitarianism, Violence.

Further Readings

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