

FREEDOM IN DARK TIMES

HOW ARENDTIAN FREEDOM MAY APPEAR

Recently, one has seen a growing interest in the work of Hannah Arendt, whose philosophical attempt to understand totalitarianism also involved a concrete analysis of the situations in the Third Reich and The Soviet Union. The notion of freedom is a central theme in Arendt's work. I base my analysis of Arendt's concept of freedom on how the concept is explored in *The Human Condition*, together with several of Arendt's essays, particularly "What is Freedom?". Her main focus is political freedom and the conditions under which such freedom is possible. According to Arendt, there is some degree of freedom in all human activities, except labor. We live in a time where the commonsensical commitment to freedom, at least in liberal, democratic communities, is unquestionable. However, it is not clear where my individual freedom ought to or can end in a collectivity. In this text, I examine what conditions Arendt argue are necessary in order for freedom to appear.

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Abbreviations

HC = *The Human Condition*

OT = *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

PP = *The Promise of Politics*

IIP = *Introduction into Politics*

OR = *On Revolution*

WiF = *What is Freedom?*

Born with the gift for freedom

For Arendt, even people in totalitarian states are born with the gift for freedom. This means they always, even in the darkest times, have the potential of spontaneously starting something new – of creating a miracle and breaking the automatic human processes. Arendt distinguishes the 'pre-political' human capacity to begin something new which does not depend upon the presence of others, from freedom as "the *raison d'être* of politics" (WiF: 145, 149). This distinction, according to Arendt, is difficult for modern people to understand because "the entire modern age has separated freedom and politics" (WiF:149). In the secondary literature on Arendt, scholars often distinguish

between public and political freedom. In Arendt's own words, however, especially in "What is Freedom?", this relation is understood as the relationship between freedom and politics. Hence, if we ask with Arendt where "freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in the events which are talked about," her answer is clearly "in the political realm", which is "political in the sense of the polis" (WiF:153). Arendt says that we need "the polis", or a politically organized community that guarantees "this space of appearances". For her, everything that occurs in this space "is political by definition" (WiF:153).

Politics

In Arendt's presentation, freedom as a phenomenon of thought or will is a nonpolitical phenomenon (WiF:150). It would, however, be a mistake to read Arendt as claiming that the human faculties of thought and will are unfree (or that there is no such thing as inner freedom). Thinking, willing, and judgment are the three human activities belonging to the *vita contemplativa*, the mental life, according to Arendt. She analyzes thinking and wil-



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ling in *The Life of the Mind* (LM). At the time of Arendt's death in 1975, she was in the process of writing about judgment, the last activity belonging to the *vita contemplativa*. Arendt claims that "we can find traces of and signs in almost all his [human's] activities" of "the faculty of freedom" (WiF:167). However, these traces and signs of the faculty of freedom "develops fully only when action has created its own worldly space where it can come out of hiding, as it were, and make its appearance" (WiF:167).

Political freedom is Arendt's main concern. "Introduction into politics" (IIP) in the book *The Promise of Politics* is a key text in which Arendt evaluates the concept of the political, re-examines the Greek and Roman understanding of the political sphere and compares it with modernity. In Arendt's view, her contemporary time (Arendt was born in 1906 and died in 1975) was dominated by prejudices against politics, prejudices that "are themselves political in the broadest sense" (IIP:96). These prejudices "indicate that we have stumbled into a situation in which we do not know how to function in just such political terms" (IIP:96). Arendt's point is that we need to take these prejudices, which are themselves political, seriously, because they indicate a possibility that to her is dangerous:

Underlying our prejudices against politics today are hope and fear; the fear that humanity could destroy itself through politics and through the means of force now at its disposal, and, linked with this fear, the hope that humanity will come to its senses and rid the world, not of humankind, but of politics. (IIP:97)

The hope that humanity could solve its problems by abolishing politics, could, according to Arendt, lead to a "world government that transforms the state into an administrative machine" (IIP:97). A world government ruled by "bureaucratic rule" or "the anonymous rule of the bureaucrat" may not be a tyranny ruled by a despot in the traditional sense (IIP:97). Still, Arendt argues that this bureaucratic rule "is no less despotic just because 'nobody' exercises it" (IIP:97). Actually, "it is more fearsome still," Arendt claims, because this type of despotic rule even loses its relational aspect: "No one can speak with or petition this 'nobody'" that constitutes "the anonymous rule of the bureaucrat" (IIP:97). The possible loss of the relational aspect of politics is particularly worrisome to Arendt, who sees "politics [...] arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*" (IIP:95). This means that, if for some reason or other, human plurality is destroyed – as in, human beings

cannot appear in the public through speech and action, – so, too, is politics.

Therefore, what problems is it humanity may or have been trying to solve by abolishing politics? The answer is totalitarianism, which Arendt analyzed brilliantly in *On Totalitarianism* (OT). After the totalitarian Nazi Germany, which to her represented the breakdown of politics and was the main experience of her generation, there was a widespread concern in the Western world as to whether politics and freedom were at all compatible (IIP:109). This breakdown in politics occurred, according to Arendt, in the Third Reich or in Stalin's Soviet Union, (I mention these specific regimes not because they represent the only totalitarian regimes nor an extensive list of totalitarian regimes but because they are the one Arendt analyses in detail in OT). Totalitarianism, she claims, is a new and modern phenomenon, which destroys, among other things, human plurality and the public.

The public

Arendt notes that "the term 'public' signifies two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena" (HC:50). The first phenomenon is about appearance; that "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity" (HC:50). The second phenomenon is "the world itself" (HC:52), which she introduces at the beginning of *The Human Condition* (HC) as "the human artifice [which] separates human existence from all mere animal environment" (HC:2).¹The fact that the world is human-made and relational is important because it refers to the part of humanity that we do not share with animals: "life itself is outside this artificial world and through life man remains related to all other living organisms" (HC:2). The term of the public depends on the dichotomy with the private, a relationship in Arendt's thinking that has been extensively discussed and debated and which I, too, have struggled with. However, an in-depth analysis of that relationship is beyond the scope of my examination at this point. For now, it is enough to note that this dichotomy is controversial. Arendt's emphasis on the public, which refers to the "closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena" (HC:50) of, firstly, appearance and publicity, and, secondly, the world, is important because it signals the conditions of the space in which freedom can appear: "Wherever human beings come together – be it privately or socially, be it in public or politically – a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from another" (IIP:106). The public space

is not ruled by life and necessity, which the private sphere is. Rather, it rests on the fact that other people can see and hear what I do and say, and the fact that what I do and say is not concerned with my life nor with my necessity, but rather with the things that other people and I have in common. For the ancient Greeks, freedom was closely connected to a specific physical space (IIP:170).

Even though Arendt draws heavily upon the ancient Greeks thinking in order to develop her own notion of freedom, it would not be correct to say that Arendtian freedom is “rooted” in a space. It is, however, true that Arendtian freedom is closely connected with a type of space that she terms the space of appearance, which to her is “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me” (HC:198). There is a difference between how the ancient Greeks saw freedom as being rooted in a space and how Arendt sees the space of appearance as coming into being wherever humans are together in the manner of speech and action. The main difference relates to how Arendt claims that there are “traces and signs [of freedom] in almost all of his [human’s] activities” (WiF:167). Not only is freedom a much more dynamic process for Arendt than it was for the Greeks – whose view of freedom as being rooted in a space can, for us, seem quite instrumental – but we can also find traces of it in almost all of human’s activities. The main point for Arendt’s faculty of freedom, however, is that it “develops fully only when action has created its own worldly space where it [the faculty of freedom] can come out of hiding, as it were, and make its appearance” (WiF:167). Instead of freedom being rooted in a space, which was the case for the ancient Greeks, Arendtian freedom is a dynamic process whose traces and signs, manifest in almost all of the human activities, only develops fully when action has created its own worldly space.

Arendtian action

For Arendt, freedom is inherent in action (WiF:151). Arendtian action involves taking initiative and starting something new, whose consequences, we have no way of knowing. When action is free, it “springs from something altogether different which (following Montesquieu’s famous analysis of forms of government) I shall call a principle (WiF:150).

Freedom or its opposite appears in the world whenever such principles are actualized; the appearance of freedom, like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act. Men *are* free – as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom – as long

as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same. (WiF:151)

To *be* free also means to be in the process of performing an act and when people stop acting they also stop *being* free. This, however, does not mean that they are *unfree*, because they still possess the gift for freedom. They always have the possibility to act again. One of the equalizing aspects of action is that it is open for *everyone*. It may be easier to act for those who are citizens of communities that protects their civil rights and liberties, communities which we, normally, label liberal democracies. For Arendt, there is virtuosity in action (WiF:151).

Arendt sees the virtuosity of an action as related to the metaphors used by the Greeks “to distinguish political from other activities, that is, that they drew their analogies from those arts in which virtuosity of performance is decisive” (WiF:151-152). The political space does not automatically come into existence in every community. Arendt claims political freedom is actualized relationally. The actualization of public freedom is dependent upon certain conditions. Arendt claims that political freedom can only be actualized in a public realm, through the human activities of speech and action which, when performed in the public realm, has the potential to make political freedom appear.

Speech and action

The second condition necessary for freedom to appear in the public realm is that it has to be actualized through the human activities of speech and action. These activities, i.e. speech and action, are the two “genuine political activities” (Mahrtdt 2011:146, my translation). Why does Arendt insist on writing these two human activities together? What, exactly, is their relationship? Arendt starts the chapter “Action”, which introduces the chapter on “The Disclosure of the Agent in Speech and Action” (HC:175) with a quote by Isak Dinesen (pseudonym for Karen Blixen) that refer to the power and importance of human narratives. Arendt implies that human beings need narratives and stories in order to understand themselves and the world. Action and speech, which are two separate activities, share the basic condition of “human plurality” (HC:175). Human plurality has two different sides, a “twofold character”, which is equality and distinction. The *equality* in human plurality refers to the fact that we are all human beings and thereby share the same human condition. The equality in human plurality is important in order for human beings to “understand each other and those who came before them” and

“plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them” (HC:175). The *distinction* in human plurality refers to the fact that every human being is unique: “each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be” (HC:175). The distinction in human plurality is the reason why human beings need speech and action, and not “signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants” in order “to make themselves understood” (HC:175-176).

Human beings, according to Arendt, reveal their unique distinctness through action and speech in the public. Action and speech are “modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men” (HC:176). Arendt claims there is something essentially human about these activities. Arendt claims that action and speech rests on “an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human” (HC:176). Action and speech, together with labor and work (HC:7), constitute the activities in *vita activa*. A human being can refrain from labor and work and still be human, but “a life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (HC:176). To be locked into the private realm without the possibility to exist in public is to be refused to experience the actualization of freedom, according to Arendt.

Arendt claims that all human beings are born with the gift for freedom grounded in natality (birth). However, they still have to be courageous and step into the public in order to make freedom appear. Arendt refers to this step into the public as a ‘second birth’: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (HC:176-177). The second birth relates to the first, actual human birth. It is also related to Arendt’s theory and focus on beginnings: “With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when men was created but not before” (HC:177).

The move into the public involves becoming visible. We appear in the public through action and speech thus distinguishing ourselves from others. To act, in its most general sense, means to “take an initiative [...], to set something into motion” (HC:177). Speech can also be a form of action: “many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech” (HC:178). Speech is particularly important because of its inherent revelatory

character: “Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words” (HC:178-179). For action to be *action* in Arendt’s sense there has to be speech attached to it. The same is not true the other way around: Speech is not always action in Arendtian framework, but action has to have speech attached to it, in order to qualify as Arendtian action. This is because “action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it, is meaningless” (HC:180-181). Here, we have seen that it is not enough to have a human-made public space in which human beings can come together; they also have to be able to participate in the activities of speech and action in order for political freedom to appear.

Constitution, laws, judiciary

It is not enough to have a public realm in which political freedom can appear today, for its current citizens, in order for Arendt to be satisfied with the level of political freedom in a given community. Rather, Arendt demands that the community has to be based upon a constitution; one needs laws and a judiciary that protect the existence of a public realm in which citizens can come together to make freedom appear; not only today and tomorrow; but also when today’s citizens are gone and their children and grandchildren inherit the community. The constitution, the laws and the judiciary should be created in such a way that the descendants of today’s citizens will have the same rights and possibility to enter the public realm and make freedom appear relationally through speech and action, as today’s citizens have: “If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men” (HC:55). This means, that the public space in the world is about protecting and guaranteeing its future existence. It is not enough to live in a community in which political freedom is possible today. A public realm is not identical with freedom; rather, there is an interdependence between the public realm and freedom. The existence of a public realm has to have a permanence, which means that the public space cannot be erected for one generation only.

These formal requirements create stability around the public sphere, and this stability and protection is necessary if freedom is to appear: “Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance” (WiF:147). Being that there is a spontaneity implicit in action; which is uncontrollable and reacts in connection with natality; the fact that the world is constantly overthrown with newcomers and all people inhabit

the possibility for new beginnings; it is essential that there are laws, regulations and a constitution that guarantee the conditions for the worldly experience of freedom. In HC, where Arendt analyses the three human activities in the *vita activa* – labor, work and action – she does not simply romanticize or idealize action; she is also concerned with the negative and destructive consequences of it. I act into a public sphere in which other people also act; and every person's action will react together with the other agents' actions in a way that is unpredictable in its outcome. Human beings can deal with the power and unpredictability of action in two ways, according to Arendt, and it is by the human capacities of 1) making and keeping promises, and of 2) forgiveness (HC:237).

We know, then, that Arendt's insistence upon the importance of laws, regulations and constitutions supports the notion that she does not mean that to imply that criminals ought to go unpunished, or that they ought to be forgiven. A people living together in a community ought to have laws and regulations that judge and punish the breaking of these laws that the community has agreed upon on. The potential of endless new beginnings and the spontaneity and unpredictability of action do not necessarily have what is commonly thought of as positive outcomes. Rather, it can be experienced as uncontrollable, scary and even dangerous. If we were to live in a community in which there were no laws, no regulations, and no constitution, the gift for freedom would have no stabilizer. One could say that freedom would be limitless and anarchist. Arendt, however, does not believe in anarchism, precisely because, in her argument, a gift for freedom grounded in natality (birth) that lacks a protected public space in which the freedom can appear, is also a community in which people obviously have the gift for freedom, but lacks the stability guaranteed by laws necessary for it to be safe for individuals to let freedom appear. Political freedom is dependent upon a constitution, laws, rules and regulations that a community has agreed upon on: guidelines that present a protection of its citizens. One could argue that in a community, that lacks a constitution, laws, rules and regulations, citizens or people still have the gift for freedom and are therefore still able to step into the public realm and make freedom appear. However, by doing so, they are not only metaphorically but actually risking their lives.

Freedom for Arendt is actualized in a politically guaranteed public realm, which is based on a constitution and has a functioning judiciary. Once we appear in the public realm and relate to one another through speech and acti-

on, we appear as citizens, that is, as equals. As such, we can engage in politics, and once and as long as we act together with others, freedom can appear.

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NOTER

- ¹ The human artifice of the world is separated from the earth in Arendt's anthropology. Since human beings are "earth-bound creatures" (HC:3) the earth "is the very quintessence of the human condition" and "provides human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice" in Arendt's anthropology (HC:2). This human world consists of three parts: "the human artifact" (HC:52) or "fabricated things" (HC:22), "the fabrication of human hands" (HC:52) or "cultivated land" (HC:22) and "affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together" (HC:52) or "the body politic" (HC:22). All these three elements are part of the "world of men" (HC:22). The noteworthy table metaphor refers to how "the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time" (HC:52).