

Chapter 8

Simon Critchley's Problem of Politics and Hannah Arendt's Idealism for the USA

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Introduction

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was trained as a philosopher and made her mark as a political theorist. Having studied philosophy with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, she gathered insights that led her from philosophy to political theory. I will examine her intellectual migration from a personal concern with philosophy to a political involvement in community. Hannah Arendt's journey toward the discovery of ethics in politics is a model for how a stranger discovers community and can make politics responsive to difference.

During her lifetime, she became especially well known for having described both conservative (right wing) and progressive (left wing) governments as capable of totalitarian rule (Arendt 1951). In the 1960s she was involved in delineating American democracy as typically pluralistic and was engaged by discussions about civil rights and the Vietnam War (Arendt 1972). The continuing relevance of her thinking over time is especially apparent when her methods are applied to the issue of politics as isolated by Simon Critchley in his appreciation of the impact of the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas: 'the problem of politics [is] that of delineating a form of political life that will repeatedly interrupt all attempts at totalization' (Critchley 1992, p. 223). If the word 'totalization' can be defined as a closed, inclusive world view that solves all known problems, like a metaphysical theory, then Arendt's framing of the problem of totalitarian government as an ideological formation that closes political options for those it governs is a projection of philosophy into politics. Arendt advocates an ethical stance in relation to alterity as a response to totalizing politics, what she called 'totalitarianism.' Hence Arendt's thinking addresses 'the problem of politics' and gives this problem a particular pertinence

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not only for the USA but for the universal nature of the moral issues confronting the USA and its particular form of democracy.

In this post- 9/11 era, ethical issues have become governmental problems for the USA. Moral dilemmas have arisen in the decisions within the American government regarding the use of torture at Abu Ghraib, the recurring debate over a woman's right to decide whether to have an abortion or not, the moral responsibilities of the arbiters of the housing market, gay rights, and immigration. More than ever, Arendt's insights have relevance in the debates over these issues arising from entrenched and polarizing ideological positions. For example, the use of torture in the second Bush Administration was closely allied with support for the war on terror, and hence rejection of torture as ethically compromised connected ideologically with support for terror. Arendt's ethical principles encourage a more nuanced approach to such issues, in particular by means of the close connections she makes between *conscience* and *consciousness* (see below).

In her universal appeal to our current age, Arendt is first of all a humanist whose philosophical and political thinking is grounded in language.¹ For example, she comments on how critique—etymologically derived from the Greek word *krinein*, 'to divide,'—constitutes a culturally embedded vision for her: 'When I only knew one language, I had the impression of a universe in which anything that was different cluttered up my thinking. When I learned the romance languages, I appeared to go through an incredible transformation, I changed my view of the world, I could no longer call things by their name' (Daniel and Ricoeur 1998, p. 10, my translation). From this process of learning French and English in addition to her native German, Arendt's critical thinking begins. For example, inspired by the French word *conscience*—which means both 'consciousness' and 'conscience,'—she defines 'conscience' as 'the relation between me and myself' (Arendt 1987, p. 84). This dialogue within herself initiates her journey as a stranger toward a receptive body politic within the context of her study of philosophy.

With the guidance of Heidegger and Jaspers, Arendt read Greek philosophy. From these heady university days, she developed an appreciation for Plato's description of thinking as 'the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue' (Arendt 1971, p. 446). This 'soundless dialogue' recalls the distinction/identification she made between conscience and consciousness and directs her perspective about the individual as a thinking being. For her, the ideal of the 'the man of action'—as promoted in such novels as Drieu la Rochelle's *Gilles* (1939), André Malraux's *Man's Fate* (the English title of *La Condition humaine*, 1933), and Louis Aragon's *Aurélien* (1944)—embodies an ideology that, in the middle third of the twentieth century, precludes thought. Arendt reacts to this 'man of action' by developing Socrates's dictum that 'an unexamined life is not worth living.' We can see a similar recourse to action as opposed to reflection in the aftermath of 9/11 when

¹ The problems of time and timeliness are paramount in Arendt's work, and in what follows I will use the present tense to in discussing Arendt's work in its continuing pertinence to current political crises and will employ the past tense only to describe events during her lifetime.

the USA rushed into Iraq under the misguided intelligence about the WMD (weapons of mass destruction) presented to the United Nations and to the American people as fact. Indeed, critical thinking at that time could have been the more responsible act in a world obsessed with action. Hence, self-reflection is counter-intuitive in a society that is obsessively focused on military action, as was the European world which she left during the 1930s and 1940s, and as also is our post-9/11 world, in which a terrorist act generates calls for knee-jerk revenge.

Arendt's awareness of the crucial role that community plays for the self leads her to provide parameters for the survival of the conscientious self. Within community, the self develops a critical conscience or conscientiousness that is receptive to and promotes friendship by means of concerted effort among the members of a body politic. She admires the idealist ethics of Immanuel Kant. For her, the virtuous pursuit of friendship within the politics of a community is the ultimate Kantian categorical imperative and becomes the basis for her vision of 'the reciprocal action of humans one toward the other' (Finkelkraut 2009, p. 116, my translation).

Arendt's mature political vision develops through five stages: her awareness of her status as a foreigner (I. The Stranger as Political Spectator) leads her to make political distinctions about space (II. The Private in the Public); the protection of personal privacy through law reveals a gap in the lack of protection for minority groups (III. Self-Conscious Pariah) within a democracy ruled by the majority; this results in her arguing for an interrogation of the interaction of law and the moral values of majority groups (IV. Questioning Political Space) in order to underwrite an ethics of hospitality toward others; and such a politics of alterity includes her advocacy of community action (V. Ethics in Community) as a generator of social change.

Arendt is close to Levinas here in that when he proposes 'infinity' as a vantage for opening the discussion of ethical thinking in opposition to 'totality' as a closed system that does not recognize the otherness of others. For Arendt eternal time plays a crucial role in authorizing an ongoing vision of the nature of friendship within an ethically conscious political community. Friendship develops innately from the individual's internal ethical dialogue between consciousness and conscience for the infinite development of ever-expanding concepts of tolerance between the self and its others. Arendt's view of friendship re-directs the isolation of pariahs by involving others in discussing the ethical parameters of democracy. Her own story as a foreigner gaining civic recognition exemplifies this case for ethics in political community.

The Stranger as Political Spectator

Arendt saw herself as marginalized early in life. Fleeing the Nazi Holocaust as a German Jew, Arendt was a stranger in France and then in the USA. She found comfort in philosophy that welcomed her into 'the supremacy of the spectator's way of life' (Arendt 1982b, p. 55), what she calls the *bios theoretikos*. The Greek

verb *theorein* means ‘to look at’ and lends dramatic context to Arendt’s reflections. She sees herself as a player in political theater, that is, as a speaker on the moral stage of the political action being described (Collin 1992, p. 31). Arendt’s look at politics is an ethical opportunity for her consciousness and conscience to interact prior to her moving into the arena of action. She prefers to see her conscience as the awareness of knowledge to create the basis for political decisions. Her struggle to determine what she knows or believes provides the moral setting for her political observations. She brings her reading of Kant into her reflection about moral perspective because, while she insists that ‘in the course of speaking of [the world] we learn to be human’ (Arendt 1955, p. 25), she is struck that ‘the inhumanity of Kant’s moral philosophy is undeniable’ (p. 27). So she injects humanity into his ethics by describing the self struggling with the world through the twofold operations of conscience and consciousness. This anguish is opposed by the need to attain understanding internally and a political presence of the self externally. While establishing a moral perspective, she moves onto the political stage where she finds herself being narrated by others despite her conscious efforts to look outward toward these others.

Arendt’s present drama of politics came out of her past and her struggles with that past. The nineteenth-century Rahel Varnhagen’s conflicted self, trapped between being a pariah and her assimilated Jewishness, is the subject for Arendt’s narrative, subtitled *The Life of a Jewish Woman* (Arendt 1974), a life pattern echoing the author’s own identity in New York City after her immigration as a ‘stateless person’ in 1941 (Young-Bruehl 1982, pp. 115–163). After ten years as a resident foreigner she became a citizen of the USA. Citizenship enabled her to look from the inside of her adopted body politic. Unlike the French and German nationalities, which are tied to their languages, American citizenship is the participation in a pluralism that is practiced in its democratic form of government. Arendt claims that this pluralism is the distinction of democracy in the USA. She is continually interested in looking beyond identity patterns because, for her, ‘clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim of our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence’ (Arendt 1971, p. 418). Hence, she looks beyond the identity politics of a single ideology for ways to promote the acceptance of alterity without assimilation. Once again, Arendt needs to complicate the space in which she finds herself. This need to ‘divide’ (*krinein*) leads her to advance distinctions that enable her to have multiple identities simultaneously.

The Private in the Public

Turning the individual toward community involvement is Arendt’s primary political agenda. She scoffs at the ideal of individualism fostered in democracy as practiced in the USA. While the private/public distinction may appear unfortunate

to those who see the distinction as an opportunity to restrict women to the home, in fact Arendt advocates the extension of private space into public space, for the individual to reach out and become political. She observes that 'the two realms [of the public and the private] indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself' (Arendt 1958, p. 33). Arendt admires the embodiment of the inter-penetration of private and public spaces in Rosa Luxembour, one of the founders of the Spartacus League that evolved into the German Communist Party. Luxembour became German by marriage and linked her private life to the public space of the Spartacist uprising in 1919. Luxembour thus exemplifies Arendt's promotion of the awareness of 'the web of human relationships' (Arendt 1958, p. 184) where the most private expression of human action can be realized in the public space 'where freedom can appear' (Benhabib 1992, p. 78).

The temporal concerns of political action involve the moral voice of conscience as Arendt investigates political rituals relating private and public spaces. Her identification of religion with its etymon *religare* ('tying back together'), in speaking about the Roman and American models of revolt, requires the existence of rituals of the public space where participants seek 'to bind themselves back to a beginning' (Arendt 1963b, p. 199). Time relates political spaces through the moral choices the individual makes to enter the public space from the private one. The collective search for a beginning implies a common search for origins, not unlike the common ethical code that binds a community together and recalls what Arendt identifies in Kant's morality as 'the coincidence of the private and the public' (Arendt 1982a, p. 49). She is also haunted, however, by the personal view of how the community, such as the German one during the National Socialist rule, can also produce 'collective guilt' (Arendt 1945, p. 20) that erases individual responsibility for heinous communal acts such as genocide.

The Self-Conscious Pariah

Arendt's own political involvement during the 1920s in Germany made her conscious that Zionism would provide the means to make ethical distinctions between parvenu and pariah. Prior to the hope of Zionism for Jews, political anti-Semitism totalized (in the Levinas sense of restricting ethical otherness to intelligibility) Jews as others who could only be pariahs if they rejected assimilation. In her biography of Varnhagen (Arendt 1974), Arendt questions the assimilation of Jews that led to the distinction between the parvenu and the pariah. She sees herself also as a pariah from the mainstream, as one who values independent thinking. For her, Zionism was not primarily the ambition of Herzl, with his idealistic promotion of a nationalist identity for Jews in the middle of Palestine, but rather the thoughtful case made by Bernard Lazare during the Dreyfus Affair, and later by Kurt Blumenfeld in Germany during the 1920s. Lazare's Zionism valued being a politically conscious pariah rather than the parvenu who represented a false equality for assimilated

Jews. Instead of Varnhagen as the model of a Jewish woman who ‘spent most of her life using her gender in an attempt to escape her Jewishness’ (On 1997, p. 296), Arendt uses her own time as a model when she decides to struggle with the insider-outsider paradigm of Jewishness and to declare herself a stranger. Her own historical setting places her politically in the world as she writes that ‘every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he is born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger’ (Arendt 1994, p. 308). These words resound in the feminism of Julia Kristeva for whom women must remain in the margins to better see themselves in their distinctiveness (Moi 1987, pp. 150–176).

Arendt does not ignore the importance of these margins. In fact, she advocates moving from the margins of the private life to an accessible public life. By distinguishing the public from the private, Arendt builds upon the prior difference attributed to the parvenu/pariah distinction, as insightfully described by Benhabib: ‘the *public* is a term of inclusion as well as exclusion. . . based upon defining the ‘we’ and the ‘they,’ that which is properly public and that which is private’ (Benhabib 1996, p. 206). Hence either term is implied in the other such that the space of the margins remains for the woman who can enter the public arena of politics. Arendt retains her pariah status as one who is in the margins of the private arena, which invests the public with ethical meaning. Such ethical activity places time as the lock-step succession of past-present-future in the context of infinity whose temporal openness allows differences to be accepted without historical prejudice. This is the realm of Arendt’s intellectual model of ‘the pearl diver’ whose ‘thinking delves into the depths of the past’ (Arendt 1955, p. 205) and retrieves lessons that promote alterity like the pearl of an oyster. Sometimes, however, the pariah uses this exceptional status as an excuse to become part of ‘inner emigration’ (Arendt 1955, p. 22). Such a condition marks the individual who accepts the calling of pariah to avoid dealing with being in the world and that is ‘the great privilege of being unburdened by care for the world’ (Arendt 1955, p. 14). This care for the world draws one into the public space of work.

The validation of the public space involves the balance between conscience and consciousness so crucial for the condition of women in the workplace. Equality of working conditions and fair compensation are working goals that are often not realized because working women are identified by gender to the exclusion of their condition as workers. Benhabib isolates Arendt’s contribution to this predicament: ‘Arendt ontologizes the division of labor between the sexes, biological suppositions which have historically confined women to the household and to the sphere of reproduction alone’ (Honig 1995, p. 98). There is much more that must be recognized in the political self-awareness of the pariah. Arendt insists that ‘implicit in the urge to speak is the quest for meaning. . . ’ (Arendt 1978a, v. 1, p. 99). She narrates her own story concerning the Zionism of Bernard Lazare, who inspired her ‘to rouse the Jewish pariah to a fight against the Jewish parvenu’ (Arendt 1978a, v. 2, p. 68). In this process women can also learn to fight their assimilation into mainstream society and thus to question the single dimension of the word ‘woman.’ Arendt sees herself as a questioning pariah who cannot simply accept the place of the margins

but rather questions the others by reference to her position as an outsider. This marginalization leads her to the questioning of all essentialist identities, including her Jewishness, which entails much struggle because, as she admits, 'the trouble is that I am independent' (Arendt 1978b, p. 250). Her independence brings her the strength of her probing questions, sometimes without ready answers, and also the concomitant sense of conscience, which ensues and promises comfort. She does not pursue independence calmly simply to seek her own identity. Instead, she leads with her questions about the very nature of the space where the pariah can be at home with her otherness.

Questioning Political Space

Haunted by the worldlessness of the parvenu as embodied by Varnhagen, Arendt focuses on being in the world and letting the world know about her presence. This situating of the self entails negotiating time and space with the self, that is, the identity of the self as perceived by others. Identity politics has been a shadow of cultural history, especially for the last 50 years. 'Identity crises' (Dunn 1998) have been magnified by the global tensions of the post 9/11 era. While Arendt refuses the issue of a single identity for herself, she also questions the practice of assimilation into a political identity. By marking the political alternatives of fascism, communism, and capitalism as equally capable of totalitarian rule (Arendt 1951), Arendt points to the dangers of political assimilation. Arendt rejected the label of either left- or right-wing. This refusal recalls her analysis of totalitarian government as being characteristic of neither progressive nor conservative rulers. Instead, it is identity that becomes a prison in the public space.

Whether for her time and space or ours, Arendt questions the totalization of ideology whereby a parvenu is assimilated and figuratively 'disappeared' in a foreign environment. She wrestles with the direction and the parameters of a politics that could promote an ethics of hospitality toward others. Rather than to reduce others to the sameness of the self, such an ethics would accept difference in others. Arendt's awareness that moral conduct is still possible leads her to search for the values that human thinking promotes in the body politic. She advocates for moral qualities in the public space. She was especially concerned with forgiveness as a political virtue. This is not Christian forgiveness, rather it is the forgiveness learned from the Jewish rituals of the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Forgiveness of this kind has no mediator and is an annual act that is interpersonal rather than divine. Kristeva brings the psychoanalytical perspective to bear in explaining that, for Arendt, '... forgiveness is addressed to the person, not the act' (Kristeva 2001, p. 80). This forgiveness comes into play in the political application of tolerance, during her lifetime between the Arabs and the Jews in the settlement of Israel, then between blacks and whites during the 1960s in the civil rights movement. She even dared, in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, to question why 'there was no mention of decent Arabs' (Arendt 1963a, p. 13) while the Nazis and

the Arabs were lumped together and portrayed as the enemies of civilization during the show trial.

Questioning without receiving answers is frustrating and generates hostility in the disenfranchised who are looking for answers. Arendt admires Rosa Luxemburg's 'commitment to revolution [as] primarily a moral matter' (Arendt 1955, p. 51) rather than the armed, military action planned by Lenin. Civil disobedience is always an option. The democratic form of government is no better at responding to questions from minority groups than other forms of government because the real hindrance to questioning is in capitalism, which refuses to be subject to the demands of pluralistic democracy and alterity. Sounding like Theodor Adorno or Jean Baudrillard, Arendt recognizes, along with Marx, the inhumanity of capitalism in 'the alienation that results from the commodity fetishism inherent in money relations between people' (Arendt 1982a, p. 77). This interest for capital is the political question of 'inter-est,' which she defines as that which 'lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together' (Arendt 1958, p. 182). In theory, politics should provide such a glue; but often capitalist greed divides political discussion between those who have capital and those who do not. Arendt nevertheless looks within political discussion for that which lies 'between people.' The binding power of community attracts her as she seeks answers to her political questioning. From her story of the public, self-conscious pariah, she finds redemption in ethical politics.

The Ethical in the Community

Arendt finds hope that ethics is possible in political life. The plurality inherent in the democracy of the USA is a source of ethical activity by virtue of the dialogic opportunities it affords. While espousing the survival of moral conduct in the body politic, Arendt moves toward the identification of infinity as the working concept of political time. As with storytelling in which she observes that 'the end of the story itself is in infinity' (Arendt 1982a, p. 77), so concerted action of members of a community working and struggling together toward common moral goals participates in the openness of infinity, that is, in change that accepts the otherness of others. Her positioning of ethical infinity as openness to difference parallels what Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* (1969) does in opposing infinity to totality and hence defining ethics as an affirmation of alterity.

Arendt locates the workshop for ethics in political communities. Individuals of varying backgrounds and interests come together for a common political purpose, even if it is a violent plurality entailing civil disobedience. One of her desired goals for such political cohesion is a quality that Arendt borrows from Heidegger: *Gelassenheit*—the calmness that allows others to be, to exist in their otherness rather than to be assimilated through understanding or identity. The differences of others must be respected in an ethical setting for politics and government. Democracy that functions through plurality in the USA can place the self in a relationship

of tolerance with respect to others. Arendt's work in the public space of the civil rights movement exemplified her own commitment to this ideal. She thus posits *Gelassenheit* as a calmness that allows others to be within the common political purposes of friendship. Her vision of consciousness and conscience as part of a mutual, dialectical thinking process also recalls that responsibility within a community is not merely responding to the moral imperatives of Kant's system, but 'it flows naturally out of an innate pleasure in making manifest, in clarifying the obscure, in illuminating the darkness' (Arendt 1955, p. 75). In such a new Enlightenment, consciousness and conscience go hand in hand with what Arendt calls 'collective responsibility' (Arendt 1987, p. 46), that is, whether an individual's conduct is good for the world in which she or he lives.

The context of the individual's conduct is a key to Arendt's ethics. She finds community as the public space for the individual within the ties of friendship. The common moral interests of friendship form the basis of community. Arendt derives this insight from Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* wherein 'Lessing... considered friendship... to be the central phenomenon whereby alone true humanity can prove itself' (Arendt 1955, p. 12). Arendt's vision for individuals joined by friendship is the basis for an ethical politics. Returning to Critchley, he places both ethics and politics within the scope of justice: 'At the level of justice, I and the Other are co-citizens of a common *polis*' (Critchley 1992, p. 232). In this sense, both Critchley and Arendt visualize ethical politics as a worldwide model for universal justice.²

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