

Understanding and “The Political” in Hannah Arendt’s Thought

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Abstract: A core aspect of Arendt’s political theories is the idea that in order to theoretically understand politics or “the political”, it indeed has to be understood and described in hermeneutical terms, although, Arendt herself explicitly don’t use the term “political hermeneutics” and there is no elaborate and explicit theory of hermeneutics in her writings and there is not any theory of hermeneutics in her respective ideas about politics and “the political”. In this essay, I want to show common aspects and features between understanding and the political in Hannah Arendt main works including human condition, life of mind and essay in understanding. In Arendt’s thought, politic and understanding are the other side of each others and in her main exquisite insights and ideas, political activity or action is the same interpretative reality of human beings.

Key words: Action, Hannah Arendt, the political, understanding, explicitly

INTRODUCTION

Today, Arendt as one of most famous political thinker of the 20th century is regarded primarily as a thinker or theorist whose main insights feed into contemporary debates about rights, citizenship, the nature of the modern state and other themes that define the sphere of political theory but she rarely speaks about her method or methodological affairs in her works.

Hannah Arendt almost never discussed methodological problems. Her writings contain only scattered remarks on this topic and only very rarely she spoke explicitly and in detail about her own method of thinking (Vollrath, 1977). Although, she does have a distinct and consistent method, she hardly ever explicates or reflects upon it in a systematic way as many theorists have noticed with regret. In a reply to Eric Voegelin she wrote:

I... know that I failed to explain the particular method which I came to use and to account for a rather unusual approach-not to the different historical and political issues where account or justification would only distract to the whole field of political and historical sciences as such. One of the difficulties of the book is that it does not belong to any school and hardly uses any of the officially recognized or officially controversial instruments

She also in the life of the mind I describe a method in her works as something that is “mercifully hidden from its researcher, though... may be or rather, seem to be quite manifesto to reader and listener...” (Arendt, 1971).

Arendt’s method of investigating the human affairs and political subjects only matches an undercurrent of interpretative tendencies within both scholarly domains and significantly differs from the general trend within the humanities and the social sciences. In the other worlds, Arendt’s method differs from conventional methods and paradigms within both the humanities and the social sciences.

The purpose of this essay is to show that Arendt’s works implies a special interpretative approach to the method in which “the political” and understanding are the other side of each other. For it, I first review Arendt’s view about understanding by focusing on her important work, essay in understanding and then I will study the issue of “the political” and “action” in her human condition.

ARENDT’S UNDERSTANDING OF UNDERSTANDING

An important aspect of Arendt’s methodological approach is her criticism of regular and traditional methods in the humanities and the empirical social sciences. The relationship between Arendt’s thought and sociology has often been perceived as fundamentally antagonistic (Walsh, 2011). Since, political phenomena such as events, incidents and facts which make up the world of appearances are the topics that Arendt is interested in she appose any method that denies human creativity and innovation. Therefore, Arendt strongly disagrees with causality.

In Arendt’s view in the historical sciences, whoever really believes in causality “actually denies the subject matter of his own science”. Thus, she argues any generalizations and categorizations destroy all inherent

meaning, significance or meaningfulness of the phenomenon. Since, she thinks the realm of the historian is novelty and newness, Arendt believes if historian insists on causality and pretends to be able to explain events by a chain of causes which eventually led up to them. This newness can be manipulated. She writes:

Causality, however is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences. Not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past "causes" which we may assign to it... but this past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it

According to Arendt, understanding as distinguished from having the correct information and scientific knowledge "is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality that is try to be at home in the world". Arendt is interested in the typical or exemplary experiences of the political: new events and facts that emerge as a consequence of human actions and words:

She approaches to events, men and things in a typically hermeneutic fashion which means she is oriented towards the interpretation of the meaning of phenomena. As such, her approach is opposed to the pursuit of the discovery of causes or motives, patterns, processes, forces, laws or trends in short, regularities and necessities in the realm of the human affairs. Such regularities, Arendt held are mostly made, i.e., imposed upon events through induction from observed data

Knowledge and understanding in Arendt thought "are not the same but they are interrelated". As she writes, "understanding is based on knowledge and knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding... understanding precedes and succeeds knowledge".

It aims at understanding political phenomena through the way they appear to those living through them, including scholars that is through the way they experience and interpret them. Because of this orientation to understanding and interpretation, Arendt's method differs from conventional methods and paradigms within both the humanities and the social sciences.

According to many thinkers such as Veronica Vasterling, Arendt's philosophical roots in particular her

approach to methodological issues are actually quite close to those of Gadamer. Gadamer and Arendt studied with Heidegger in the 1920's and both have in common that they are profoundly influenced by the early phenomenological hermeneutics of Heidegger. Furthermore, both of them have transformed this legacy in an acutely plenteous path in Gadamer's case into a philosophical hermeneutics and in Arendt's case into a political hermeneutics. "The influence of Heidegger on Arendt's work is generally acknowledged. What is hardly acknowledged is that hermeneutics and phenomenology are a very important, arguably the most important, part of this legacy" (Vasterling, 2011).

The influence of Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical philosophy on Arendt's political and philosophical thought is obvious not only in her essay in *Understanding* which directly survey the hermeneutic issue but also in a number of key concepts of her general theory of politics and action such as the concepts of action, world, natality and her idea of peculiar narratives that constitute public spaces and political communities. Furthermore, the main root of her political theory is influenced and shaped by "her conscious attempt to emancipate herself from the political traditions of continental and particularly of German philosophy by turning to the distinctly political experiences of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and to the modern American political tradition".

Finally, some scholars talking about Arendt's hermeneutical strategy. According to them, the hermeneutical strategy that she employed to think and write is in debted to Walter Benjamin, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger". Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves about this fundamental influence writes:

From Benjamin she took the idea of a fragmentary historiography, one that seeks to identify the moments of rupture, displacement and dislocation in history. Such fragmentary historiography enables one to recover the lost potentials of the past in the hope that they may find actualization in the present. From Heidegger, she took the idea of a deconstructive reading of the Western philosophical tradition, one that seeks to uncover the original meaning of our categories and to liberate them from the distorting incrustations of tradition. Such deconstructive hermeneutics enables one to recover those primordial experiences (*Urphaenomene*) which have been occluded or forgotten by the philosophical tradition and thereby to recover the lost origins of our philosophical concepts and categories

“THE POLITICAL” AND “THE SOCIAL”

Hannah Arendt is widely regarded as a political theorist who sought to rescue politics and political theory from society and the social sciences. In other words, Arendt regarded the modern realms of ‘the political’ and ‘the social’ as fundamentally antagonistic to each other. Seyla Benhabib argues that ‘the social’ has three ‘dominant meanings’ in Arendt’s work:

At one level, the social refers to the growth of the capitalist commodity and exchange economy. At the second level, it refers to aspects of mass society. In the third and least investigated sense, the social refers to sociability to the quality of life in civil society and civic associations

But among this three meaning, it is generally believed that Arendt tries to show that the whole concept of ‘society’ is a comparatively recent historical phenomenon which first arose in 17th century Europe and whose subsequent dominance is largely to be regretted (Walsh, 2011).

The social question began to play a revolutionary role only when, in the modern age and not before, men began to doubt that poverty is inherent in the human condition to doubt that the distinction between the few who through circumstances or strength or fraud had succeeded in liberating themselves from the shackles of poverty and the laboring poverty-stricken multitude was inevitable and eternal. The transformation of the Rights of Man into the rights of Sans-Culottes was the turning point not only of the French Revolution but of all revolutions that were to follow

Arendt distinguishes the political from the social and appreciates “the political” because “the social” for her indicative the sacrifice of freedom in front of the demands of necessity as well as from activities that are “normally” associated to be political but on her account are not such as governing. In Arendt’s view, freedom can exist and people can appear to one another as equal participants in political life, only in a human-made public space. In addition to exemplars of political action drawn from the Greeks, “Arendt takes the French and American Revolution as well as the civil rights movement as significant, authentic incarnations of the political”.

The rise of the social refers to the expansion of the market economy from the early modern period and the ever increasing accumulation of capital and social wealth. With the rise of the social everything has become an object of production and consumption of acquisition and exchange; moreover, its constant expansion has resulted in the blurring of the distinction between the private and the public. The victory of animal laborans refers to the triumph of the values of labor over those of homo faber and of man as *zoon politikon*. All the values characteristic of the world of fabrication permanence, stability, durability as well as those characteristics of the world of action and speech freedom, plurality, solidarity are sacrificed in favor of of the values of life, productivity and abundance

The distinctive concept of the political and politics in Arendt, combined with her emphasis on “civic engagement and unconstrained political deliberation, represents a powerful rebuttal of the tendency, manifest in modernity to absorb the political into the social”.

According to Arendt in a world sharply divided between the private and the public realms, it is only in the sphere of the latter that citizens engage in action and praxis and just for this reason she regards action as the highest form of human activity. Until, we are matter to the demands of social problem, its necessity and biological life, we are unable to think what is suitable for political life.

Arendt is seriously worried about the dangers that the rise of the social imposes to political life as well as the limitations we accept when we think of political life as analogous to the household realm as a tendency in western political thought that started with Plato. For Arendt, thinking of the political in terms of matters of material reproduction and subsistence also leads us “to accept hierarchy in place of equality” and to see rule, rather than equality as the core of politics (Turner, 2000). The public realm provides a space of appearances, a “theatre where freedom appears” where we can appear together with others to engage in action. Hence, plurality is a condition of political action without other actors, no action is possible. To act and to be free, for Arendt, amount to the same thing. Freedom, Arendt argues, needs “a place where people could come together the agora, the market place or the polis, the political space proper”. Political freedom is exemplified in the act of founding of instituting new beginnings. As she puts it:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs, faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence

In *On Violence*, edited by Jerome Kohn, Arendt by examining the conditions of politics throughout various historical time periods, offers an ontological articulation of the conditions of politics. In this research, Arendt rather asking what is politics?, directly challenges the prejudice of efforts that aim to universalize the human condition. As she puts it in the outset of introduction into politics:

Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created man but men are a human, early product, the product of human nature. Because philosophy and theology are always concerned with man because all their pronouncements would be correct if there were only one or two men or only identical men, they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: what is politics

Arendt wants to show and explain that a significant part of the problem lies in the way that philosophers and theologians have framed politics. She writes:

What is remarkable among all great thinkers is the difference in rank between their political philosophies and the rest of their works even in Plato. Their politics, never reaches the same depth. This lack of depth is nothing but a failure to sense the depths which politics is anchored...politics deals with coexistence and associations of different men

Arendt points to two good reasons that help explain why philosophers have failed to offer a foundation from which politics can take shape. She writes:

The first is the assumption that there is something political in man that belongs to his essence. This is simply not so, man is apolitical. Politics arises between men and so quite outside of man. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships. The second is the monotheistic concept of God in whose likeness man is said to have been created. On that basis, there can, of course, only be man while men come a more or less successful repetition of the same

The Arendt's main idea is this: politics is not outside of man any more than it is inside her or him; politics manifests in-between and amongst human relationships. Thus, the condition of politics arises between men and manifests political meaningfulness through words and deeds. "Given common worldliness and given our inter-subjective relations Arendt's politics had no other choice but to make a break with tradition since, the world that is held in common and relational-ontology are equally denied":

Arendt believed that political thought in the 20th century had to break with its own tradition in as radical a sense as the systematic mass murder enacted by totalitarian regimes broke with the traditional understanding of political action. Her anticipation of evil as "the fundamental question" to be faced in the postwar world explains her recognition of the need for peoples to be reconciled and for a new beginning to be made. Evil had become manifest as the inversion of the age-old foundation of Western morality Thou shalt not kill and was less abstractly understood as the "monstrousness" and "inhumanity" of the creation of "absolutely innocent" victims to demonstrate the motion of the so-called laws of nature and history"

According to Arendt, the meaning of politics is freedom and she is steadfastly committed not only to think or theorize about political events but convicted to "stress rather emphatically why response and therefore, collective responsibility is politically promising insofar as it makes possible empowerment". In the words of Arendt:

Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides... the freedom to interact in speech with many others and experience the diversity that the world always is in its totality most certainly was and is not the end purpose of politics... something that can be achieved by political means. It is rather, the substance and meaning of all things political. In this sense, politics and freedom are identical

Action: Theory of action and her revival of the ancient notion of Praxis in Arendt's thought perform one of the most important contributions to 20th century political philosophy. Action in Arendt works is one of the fundamental categories of the human condition and constitutes the highest realization of the *vita activa*.

Although, Arendt considers the three activities of labor, work and action equally necessary to a complete human life, it is clear from her writings that she takes action to be the specific difference of human beings that which distinguishes them from both the life of animals and the life of the gods. Freedom, plurality and appearance are the main aspects of action.

By freedom Arendt means the capacity to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected with which all human beings are endowed by virtue of being born. Action as the realization of freedom is therefore, rooted in natality, in the fact that each birth represents a new beginning and the introduction of novelty in the world.

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins... the new therefore, always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable... and this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before

Plurality is the other aspect of action and acting not only means to take the initiative to introduce the novum and the unexpected into the world but also means that it is not something that can be done in isolation from others that is independently of the presence of a plurality of actors who from their different views and perspectives can judge the quality of what is being enacted." It is by virtue of plurality that each of us is capable of acting and relating to others in ways that are unique and distinctive and in so, doing of contributing to a network of actions and relationships that is infinitely complex and unpredictable. This network of actions is what makes up the realm of human affairs that space where individuals relate directly without the intermediary of things or matter that is through language. Arendt believes that human beings in action and speech reveal and appear themselves as the unique and exclusive individuals they are and disclose their distinct personalities to the world. In Arendt's view, they reveal "who" they are as distinct to "what" they are.

The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action... the root of the ancient estimation of politics is the conviction that man qua man, each individual in his unique distinctness, appears and confirms himself in speech and action and that these activities, despite their material futility, possess an enduring quality of their own because they create their own remembrance... the conviction that the greatest that man can achieve is his own appearance and actualization is by no means a matter of course

Moreover, unpredictability and irreversibility are two other features of action in Arendt's thought:

Action is inherent unpredictability. This is not simply a question of inability to foretell all the logical consequences of a particular act... but arises directly out of the story which as the result of action, begins and establishes itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past

By distinguishing action from fabrication and linking it to freedom and plurality and by showing its connection to speech and remembrance, Arendt is able to articulate a conception of politics in which questions of meaning and identity can be addressed in a fresh and original manner. According to Arendt:

Action is unpredictable because it is a manifestation of freedom, of the capacity to innovate and to alter situations by engaging in them... closely connected to the boundlessness and unpredictability of action is its irreversibility. Every action sets off processes which cannot be undone or retrieved. The consequences of each act are thus not only unpredictable but also irreversible; the processes started by action can neither be controlled nor be reversed

Action in Arendt view is the only activity that corresponds to the human condition of plurality "to the fact that men not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world". According to her belief while all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, "this plurality is specifically the condition of all political life". According to Arendt, the action goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matters.

The various political-hermeneutic implications in Arendt's works as Sigwart says can be summarized in the

general idea that politics and political action is founded on a particular cognitive or “put on a specific cultural basis which consists of a peculiar common practice of experiencing and interpreting reality”. Described in hermeneutic terms:

The political is nothing but a particular mode of thinking about things, a distinct mode of experiencing and interpreting reality. It denotes the peculiar form of the experience and the thinking of citizens... the strange enterprise of understanding as a peculiar form of cognition, distinct from many others as Arendt herself characterizes it in her early essay on understanding and politics is nothing else than the other side of action and particulars of political action

CONCLUSION

Understanding for Arendt is the cognitive or an experiential side of politics, it is the other side of action and particulars of political action. Understanding implies recognizing new dimensions of events and “a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results”. Understanding for her in other words is an unending activity by which in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality. In Arendt’s view, because “newness is the realm of the historian” and each phenomenon and event in history of the human beings reveals an unexpected landscape of their deeds, statements and speeches, sufferings and “new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins”. It is the duty of the historian to detect this unexpected new “with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance”.

The great consequence which the concept of beginning and origin has for all strictly political questions comes from the simple fact that political action, like all action is essentially always the beginning of something new as such it is in terms of political science, the very essence of human freedom. If the essence of all and in

particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action, namely that form of cognition, distinct from many others, by which acting men (and not men who are engaged in contemplating some progressive or doomed course of history) eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists.

On the other hand, the political for Arendt implies the presence in public realm, action, creativity, dialogue and communication with others. The political is human beings appearance in public sphere and reveal and disclosing their identity and who they are. Therefore, the political is originally based on a certain mode of hermeneutic rationality that can be clearly distinguished from other modes of experience, interpretation and rationality.

While irreversibility, plurality, unpredictability, creativity are important features of action in Arendt’s thought and the political distinct from the social is correlated to human free and spontaneous action, understanding is also in her view an unending activity which contains perception new aspects of events, an endless and complicated process that never produces decisive and ultimate results. Understanding “is the specifically human way of being alive”.

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