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Preface

Hannah Arendt was one of the most important political thinkers of the twentieth century. A European by birth, culture and education, she reached maturity during what Eric Hobsbawm has called the age of catastrophe. Between 1914 and 1945 the stabilizing structures of modern Europe collapsed. While the parliamentary democracies of England and France remained impotent, fascist regimes consolidated their power in Italy and Spain, and popularly supported totalitarian governments emerged in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Totalitarianism was an unprecedented form of human domination, based on ideology and terror, which slaughtered millions of innocent people in the name of utopian ideals. Although Nazi Germany was defeated eventually, the two world wars had transformed Europe from the center of world civilization to a demoralized continent in ruins. From Arendt's critical perspective, the political and economic collapse of Europe extended to its intellectual, moral and cultural traditions as well. The vital human connection between the past and present had been severed; conscientious citizens were now forced "to think without banisters" (*denken ohne Geländer*).

At the end of the Second World War when the horror of the Holocaust became known, Hannah Arendt committed herself to a work of remembrance and reflection. Intellectual integrity demanded that we comprehend and articulate the genesis of totalitarian terror. What earlier spiritual and moral collapse had made totalitarianism possible? What was the basis of its evident mass appeal? To what cultural resources and political institutions could we turn to prevent its recurrence? After long years of study, Arendt concluded that the deepest crisis of the modern world was political, and that the continuing appeal of totalitarian mass movements demonstrated how profound that crisis had become.

The crisis she identified could be discerned on four distinct but interconnected levels: cultural, theoretical, institutional, and normative. The world-alienation of modernity had promoted a mass culture antithetical to republican self-government and especially prone to ideological manipulation. Our theoretical capacity to critique this culture and the ideologies it spawns is compromised because our inherited traditions have systematically misrepresented the nature of political experience. By substituting making (*poiesis*) for action (*praxis*), command and coercion for persuasion and agreement, and technical mastery for political excellence and judgment our traditional theorists have darkened the common perception of politics and reduced it to a servant of economic needs and concerns. The striking rise of economics to its present cultural supremacy has transformed the public realm into a sphere of necessity rather than freedom, while the enduring attractions of freedom have been confined to the individual pursuit of private happiness. As a result, the demoralized individuals who live within mass societies lack the informed commitment to public liberty that is needed to sustain the republican spirit. And without that spirit, the lost spirit of the great democratic revolutions, modern citizens no longer know what to require of themselves and their political leaders, now how to judge responsibly their public conduct and speech.

For Arendt, the modern political crisis is also a crisis of humanism. The radical totalitarian experiment was rooted in two fundamentally distorted images of the human being. The agents of terror believed in the limitless power generated by collective organization, a power wielded and justified by appeal to historical necessity. The victims of terror, by contrast, were systematically dehumanized by the ruling ideology, and then brutally deprived of their legal rights and their moral and existential dignity. Hannah Arendt's political humanism explicitly challenges both of these distorting images, the first because it dangerously inflates human power, the second because it subverts human freedom and agency. Human beings living together on the earth, in a humanly constructed world and within a web of fragile human connections are neither sovereign masters nor superfluous animals. Rather, they are singular and unique persons capable of distinguishing themselves through action and speech, and requiring both a public realm of freedom and excellence and a private realm of security and intimacy to protect and enhance their dignity.

In the tradition of civic republican thinkers that stretches from Aristotle to Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, Arendt made the concepts of political liberty, civic virtue and public happiness essential to her understanding of genuine citizenship. Equipped with these normative principles, she directly challenged the reductive modern anthropologies that had reduced human beings to calculating economic animals. The ideological reduction of the human person had not only been used to justify totalitarian terror; it had also

contributed to the political alienation of democratic citizens in contemporary liberal societies. If we are to recover a more authentic understanding of the human being, we will need a much richer and deeper conception of citizenship than conservatism, liberalism or Marxism provides.

Hannah Arendt's political humanism develops over several decades. It begins with her examination and appraisal of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (chapter 1). It expands with her critical retrieval of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition* (chapter 2). These two early works provide the intellectual horizon for her genealogical critique of "our tradition of political thought." In developing that critique, she amplifies her civic republican vision of citizenship by contrasting it with the dominant political visions that have shaped the western tradition (*Between Past and Future, On Revolution, Eichmann in Jerusalem, Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy).*

Chapters 3 and 4 present Arendt's critique of the tradition in its most salient and formative aspects. Many commentators on Arendt cite the importance of her genealogical criticism; very few seek to develop, understand and appraise it. I found that in providing this evaluative contrast, the merits and limitations of her thought became considerably clearer and more focused.

In the last decade of Arendt's life, she applied her civic republican insights to *The Crises of the Republic* and augmented her earlier study of the *vita activa* with a complementary account of The *Life of the Mind (Thinking and Willing).* Arendt's political thought is repeatedly criticized for its limited relevance to contemporary politics; she is said to be nostalgic for ancient republics irretrievably lost. In the final chapter, I address this important criticism by correlating Arendt's insights and oversights with the realities of contemporary liberal democracy. Thus the textual strategy and expository order of this book are closely connected to the complex process of Arendt's intellectual and political development.

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Introduction: the Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt

Je n'ai pas de traditions, je n'ai pas de parti, je n'ai point de cause, si ce n'est celle de la liberte et de la dignite humaine.
Alexis de Tocqueville
Souvenirs – 144

I should have loved freedom at all times, but in the time in which we live, I am ready to worship it.
Democracy in America, Vol II, 340

The dignity of the human person has been the central concern of modern humanism. From Pico Della Mirandola to Hannah Arendt, humanists have celebrated the creative capacities of men and women and have encouraged their desire to transform nature and history. They have also risen in defense of human dignity when it has been systematically threatened or violated. In ascribing dignity to human existence, they have been asserting the intrinsic worth of every person without regard for their specific place in a social or cultural hierarchy. Human beings are ends in themselves worthy of unconditional respect; they are not simply means or instruments subordinated to some higher purpose. In the moral categories of Immanuel Kant, means have exchange value or price, while ends have dignity and worth.

Kant located the source of human dignity in the autonomy of pure practical reason. For Kant, human beings are worthy of respect because they are the legislators of the universal moral law. Kant's enlightenment humanism was distinctively modern because it grounded human dignity in active free-

dom or responsible agency. The modern conceptions of human existence are inseparable from theories of freedom and the deeper and truer their understanding of freedom the more compelling their account of human worth.

In classical antiquity, freedom was predicated of *bioi*, complex forms of life centered on a specific human activity. For a form of life to be liberal or free, it had to be independent of biological necessity and human coercion. It had to be an intrinsically desirable way of living, allowing human beings to actualize what is divine or godlike in their natures. Both Plato and Aristotle agreed that the philosophical life, the life in search of wisdom, enjoyed the greatest freedom and dignity. Thought and contemplation, the central activities in the philosophical *bios,* are both instances of solitary freedom. In thought, the philosopher engages in an internal dialogue with himself; in contemplation he becomes silent before the revealed presence of God or eternal truth. The characteristic freedom of the *bios theoretikos* draws the lover of wisdom away from the human circle and from the cooperative ventures the presence of others makes possible.

The most influential modern conception of freedom is based on production rather than contemplation. Modernity rejects the ancient preference for the theoretical life and coordinates freedom directly with constructive agency. According to the moderns, we are most free when making or creating rather than when thinking or knowing. In the course of making or building, we exercise technical mastery over nature and control natural materials and energies for our own purposes and ends. The isolated artisan in his studio provides a good model for the modern picture of freedom. Through the exercise of craftsmanship, the artisan brings the raw materials of nature into accord with his individual intentions and aims.

Both the ancient and the modern paradigms of liberty are based on activities performed when alone. Despite their evident dissimilarities, solitary thought and sovereign craftsmanship are equally independent of human association. In grounding human dignity on freedom and then modeling freedom on making or thinking, it is easy to ignore the striking fact of human plurality. It is not man in the singular but human beings in the plural who inhabit the earth. Although the human creature may be made in the image and likeness of the Biblical God, the Creator's singularity stands in direct contrast to the creature's multiplicity. In the memorable words of Genesis 1:27, "male and female created He them." (though the Christian God is explicitly conceived as a community of persons).

If plurality is an essential feature of the human condition, then it should enjoy a central place in the understanding of human dignity and freedom. To think freedom under the condition of plurality is to discover the limits of sovereignty and individual autonomy as ideals of liberty. Despite their insights, neither Pico, nor Kant, nor modern technological humanism provides an adequate conception of cooperative agency. Each of these thinkers and

traditions fails to situate freedom securely in the web of human association; each fails to acknowledge the dependence of our limited autonomy on the prior condition of communal belonging. Only by belonging to a common world of meaning do we become capable of solitary reflection; only by apprenticeship in a community of craftsmen do we learn how to make what is durable and lasting. But communal belonging is not merely an enabling condition of individual initiative. There are distinctive modes of freedom that require the presence of others; there are important forms of activity that depend on collaboration; there is an essential connection between secure human dignity and active citizenship in a free society.

To emphasize the public aspect of liberty is not to deny freedom of thought or production. But it is to set limits on images of freedom based on these solitary experiences. When liberty is connected with plurality, it is reasonable to ask what forms of community offer the strongest support for human freedom and the greatest protection for human dignity. It is a sign of our complexity that we need to belong to many different communities in order to become fully human. The ancient Greeks believed that the *polis*, the distinctively political form of association, offered the greatest potential for freedom. Although the internal connection between liberty and citizenship is no longer self-evident, there are two great western political traditions that still insist on their interdependence. The tradition of civic humanism, which draws inspiration from the ancient republics of Greece and Rome, continues to uphold the ideal of public liberty. The modern revolutionary tradition, whose origins are traceable to Machiavelli, has also made political liberty a good worth fighting to establish. Despite intense debates between civic republicans and Jacobin revolutionaries, they share the conviction that active political citizenship is an essential part of a good human life.

Hannah Arendt, a contemporary political humanist, openly embraced these classical republican convictions. Because she was ardent in defending human dignity, she became a friend of public liberty, articulating the civic republican vision with remarkable passion and depth. The key to her thought, I believe, was her attention to human plurality and her insistence that the deep political implications of plurality have never been fully acknowledged. Her thought is often strikingly original, not because she concentrated on arcane subjects, but because she examined familiar phenomena from an unfamiliar perspective. A case in point is her reflection on human existence from the perspective of natality or birth.

A philosophical anthropology centered on human mortality, on the fact that human beings die alone, and, in dying, withdraw from the company of others, naturally emphasizes human solitude. There is a striking analogy between our permanent disappearance from the world in death and the provisional withdrawal from human affairs that occurs whenever we think. Theories of human existence keyed to the fact of mortality, typically highlight

thought rather than action, solitary withdrawal rather than engagement in the human circle, and the private rather than the public dimension of freedom. But Arendt shows clearly how these priorities are reversed when birth rather than death becomes the focus of reflective attention. At birth, new human beings insert themselves into an old world, rather than receding from its ranks. Children renew the world by their appearance within it, providing a basis for worldly hope; in this respect, birth is the contrary of death, which constantly threatens the world with despair. Birth reminds us vividly of our situated existence and of our profound dependence on other persons. We do not choose to be born but are given the gift of existence by our parents. With this fundamental gift, we receive several others: the earth, our natural home, the world, our humanly created dwelling place, the different communities within which we develop and exercise our humanity.

Concentrating on the reality of birth dispels the illusions of human autonomy and sovereignty. We are situated inescapably in a complex web of human relationships; within that web we are educated, we acquire language, we master the arts and virtues required for adult existence, we become citizens and assume our share of worldly responsibility. Speech and action, the specifically political faculties, allow human beings to actualize the potential inherent in their birth. Speech permits new human beings to share with their elders their distinctive perceptions of the common world. The bonds of civic community are created through this public conversation that humanizes the world and those who belong to it. The capacity to act, to begin or initiate unpredictable processes, is directly analogous to the nature of birth. Every human birth is a new beginning in an old world; and each child is born with the capacity to begin, the capacity for freedom. But human speech and action require the presence of others for their intelligibility. Speech would be meaningless if other persons could not understand what was said and respond to its claims and appeals appropriately; and action would be futile without peers to witness and remember what was done, or cooperative partners to carry through what the individual agent began.

Hannah Arendt's spirited defense of public liberty did not occur in an historical vacuum. Her *apologia* for freedom was neither an academic exercise nor a piece of disinterested scholarship. For her, the most dangerous threats to human dignity in this century were caused by extreme political alienation. It was the alienation of the European masses from parliamentary democracy that led to the rise of totalitarian governments. Even in the liberal democracies, like England and the United States, where civic alienation is less advanced, there has been a marked decline in political legitimacy. Evidence of this decline can be found in the loss of governmental authority, a diminished sense of civic obligation, low levels of electoral participation, and a growing contempt for traditional political parties and their leaders. On Arendt's thoughtful analysis, these are not transient historical phenomena

easily corrected with the passage of time. They are structural features of the modern world directly connected to the modern understanding of human existence and freedom.

Hannah Arendt chose to serve the cause of liberty in four inter-related ways: as a thinker, teacher, storyteller and judge. Although she carefully distinguished thought from action, she treated them as functional complements rather than contraries. Action and speech require thought to clarify their meaning and importance; human words and deeds will be forgotten unless recollective thinking transforms them into episodes in a memorable story. Arendt was convinced that the great western thinkers and storytellers had neglected the public dimension of liberty. Because of this neglect, a major part of our republican political inheritance had been left to us without a testament.[1] Deep and original thinking is needed to remedy this failure, but in contemporary life such thinking has become exceedingly difficult. There are numerous sources of thoughtlessness to contend with: a reliance on clichés and slogans as a substitute for independent reflection; an habitual inattention to what we are actually doing and saying; a dependence on shopworn ideologies whose automatic thought patterns serve as a buffer against the revelatory power of experience; the loss of candor and courage under the levelling pressure of mass society; the appeal to traditions of political thought that no longer address the vital concerns of our age.

Although thinking is a solitary activity, it greatly depends on the framework of categories and principles the thinking person inherits. We assimilate those categories in acquiring language and rely on them to understand and appraise what we do. Most of us are content to think within an existing tradition, trusting in the linguistic resources it offers for making sense of existence. But Hannah Arendt believed that the dominant western traditions had distorted or misrepresented political experience rather than rendering it intelligible. Her revisionary criticisms of both ancient and modern political theory closely resemble Heidegger's challenge to western metaphysics and Nietzsche's genealogical critique of morals. These deliberately subversive thinkers wanted to transform the inherited languages in which we think and speak about being and the good. According to Arendt, western political theories were chiefly created by philosophers, theologians or scientists rather than citizens or statesmen. Perhaps this explains the common flaw marring their credibility and relevance. Their categories of analysis and appraisal are not based on political events or on experiences rooted in human plurality but on solitary activities like thinking and making. Moreover, their emphasis on ruling as the essential political activity obscures the dependence of genuinely political relations on human equality. Rather than helping us understand and appreciate the actual contours of political experience, the dominant traditions have disparaged the importance of plurality, largely ignored public liberty, blurred important distinctions within the active life, and converted the history

of republican freedom into a narrative of dialectical necessity. Because of these powerful prejudices, we cannot rely on the great traditions, ancient or modern, to guide our understanding and judgment of political events.

If Arendt's critical suspicions are justified, the contemporary political thinker is faced with a formidable challenge. The deep political alienation of our century threatens human dignity and freedom, but "our tradition of political thought" lacks the resources to address this threat effectively. The prevailing cultural climate encourages thoughtlessness rather than authentic reflection, but our need to think, to examine the insistent realities of personal and public life, is inseparable from our need for meaning. Thinking is the sustained human effort to understand or make sense of experience. In political thinking we attempt to clarify the fundamentals of politics and to articulate the criteria by which they should be judged. When our inherited traditions can no longer be trusted, the need for free and independent thinkers becomes urgent. Hannah Arendt aspired to be such a thinker and modeled her *"selbst denken"* on the philosophers she most admired: Socrates, Augustine, Scotus, Lessing, Kant and Heidegger. She respected these thinkers because of their intellectual courage and freedom; they had remained independent of tradition's authority and were willing, as she said, "to think without banisters."[2]

Independent thinking of the sort Arendt attempted is not systematic and progressive but foundational and critical. Faced with a crisis in politics, we need to rethink the basic principles of human association. Faced with a systemic assault on human dignity, we need to rethink its foundation in the nature of the human person. Faced with an erosion of public liberty, we need to reestablish the interdependence of plurality and freedom. These foundational tasks are obligatory for the critical thinker who challenges the answers of the tradition but does not dismiss them, who seeks to recover the past and not to forget it.[3]

But where are the resources for independent foundational thinking to be found? Hannah Arendt sought them in observable phenomena, in the concrete experiences of political life; in natural languages, in the original linguistic expressions created to name and describe new political realities; in historical events and in the memorable stories that attempted to disclose their meaning and importance; in a return to the questions with which the tradition began rather than to its carefully codified answers; in appropriating the retrievable past rather than in ideological speculations on the future. To think in this exploratory way is to do for our time what Socrates had attempted to do for his. Not to produce secure epistemic results, but to liberate citizens from prejudice, to pry open unexamined opinions, to cast new light on familiar realities, to prepare human beings to judge for themselves when the ancestral rules of conduct no longer apply.[4]

If the political thinker withdraws from the human circle to think for herself, the engaged citizen returns to the public realm to share her thinking with others. The sharing of insights is the work of a teacher, and it was as teacher and storyteller that Hannah Arendt partly fulfilled her civic obligations. She believed that the genuine teacher is inspired by a dual love, love for the old and common world that needs to be conserved and protected by its adult inhabitants, and love for the young, the energetic newcomers, who need to be welcomed into that world and taught to become at home in it. The voice of the teacher is that of an older citizen transmitting a common culture and language to younger peers about to accept responsibility for the commonweal. Through this successful transmission of meaning and memory, the young learn to know and care for the world and to identify themselves with its future. Arendt believed that civic education should deliberately cultivate the *humanitas* of its students. It should free them from self-centered concern with economic necessity and utility, and awaken within them the spirit of liberality, a love of the world and its culture that transcends their natural egoism.

Arendt was a student, of course, before she became a teacher, and her teaching depended greatly on her personal educational history. Who were the teachers that had cultivated her *humanitas*? She openly acknowledged her reliance on the Greek and German poets, who, as she said, keep watch over the storehouse of memory and create the words by which human beings live.[5] She had a complex relation to the culture of the ancient world, openly criticizing Greek political philosophy while making constant appeals to Greek and Roman political experience and language. She looked with disdain on the anti-political culture of early Christianity, but admired the life and teaching of Jesus himself. Her only acknowledged political mentors were republican and revolutionary thinkers: Pericles, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Jefferson and de Tocqueville. Philosophically, she belonged to the German tradition of Lessing, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Jaspers and Heidegger. Her debt to Heidegger was immense and profoundly complicated. Her understanding of human action as self-revelation, her conception of public discourse as disclosure and concealment, her emphasis on temporality as the horizon of human existence, her radical critique of the western intellectual tradition, all these important aspects of her thought bear the stamp of Heidegger's influence. Although she greatly admired Heidegger as a thinker and teacher, she was deeply critical of his political stance and what she saw as his one-sided analysis of human existence.[6]

Perhaps Arendt's greatest strength as a teacher was her ability to resist the modern propensity for half-truths. She is difficult to classify in conventional political categories because she combined and connected what modern ideologies have fiercely opposed. She deeply distrusted the sterile oppositions between left and right, progressive and conservative, communitarian and

individualist. "Nothing compromises the understanding of political issues and their meaningful debate more seriously than the automatic thought reactions conditioned by the beaten path of ideologies born in the wake and aftermath of the French Revolution."[7] Since the early nineteenth century conservatives and liberals, progressives and radicals have tended to treat complementary principles as mutually exclusive polarities. But it is only against the background of a common world of meaning that individual differences can truly reveal themselves. And it is only in the midst of a community of peers that personal distinction and excellence can be appreciated. A credible political philosophy needs to connect what the ideologists of both left and right have consistently separated: an old world with young citizens; the spirit of conservation with a commitment to civic initiative; worldly permanence with the eruption of miraculous novelty; the security of law with institutions of republican freedom. To overcome the dichotomies governing modern political thought we need a theory of situated freedom that respects human dignity and individual rights and reveals their dependence on the protection of personal privacy and the imperative of political engagement.

The story telling of poets, historians, citizens and teachers is a primary form of civic education. Although Arendt rejected the authority of tradition, she deeply feared the loss of the past. She understood tradition as our inherited account of the past, but she regularly distinguished the interpretive stories from the actual events to which they referred. A break with tradition did not mean an end to recollective story telling, but the creation of new stories that looked at the past with fresh eyes. The actions and passions, the words and deeds that constitute human affairs are doomed to futility unless memory and narrative save them from oblivion. In a political community composed of mortal citizens, birth and death are regularly changing the roster of active participants. The constant threat of civic disintegration is offset by remembrance and story telling which rescue the dead from forgetfulness and orient the newcomers in the civilizing ways of the world. Enduring political communities are associations of memory that express their collective identity through the stories they tell of their common past. As sources of civic education, these stories reveal the unfolding history of a particular people, but they're not limited to recording its landmark events. At the core of political teaching is the larger human story that preserves both the best and the worst that human beings have done. Political cooperation is the primary source of collective power and it radically extends the human capacity for good and evil. The history (*Geschichte*) of politics is the ambiguous record of what human beings have done with their precious public freedom.[8]

Stories contribute as nothing else can to the understanding of human existence, for the storyteller gathers the events of the past into an intelligible pattern that illumines the world of the present. Hannah Arendt often cited the cautionary maxim of her political mentor de Tocqueville, "When the past