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Philosophy 463 Midterm

A Hopeless Enterprise – How Hannah Arendt poses the question of freedom

Arendt is preoccupied with the problem of freedom throughout her writings. She fled Nazi Germany in her 30's due to her Jewish heritage, and the shocking experiences of terror and death inflicted ^{upon} ~~to~~ the Jews by the Nazi's left her and many others searching for answers. Anyone who spends enough time learning about the horrors committed by Hitler, Stalin, and similar regimes will eventually frantically ask "How could this happen?". Arendt attempts to answer this question throughout many of her writings. Understanding the nature of freedom is made even more important due to her insistence that "Totalitarianism is the most radical denial of freedom"¹ and since "The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action."², we must conceive of freedom by understanding what would deny it from us.

If our desire is to understand freedom, then Arendt argues that we need to define what understanding actually is. Understanding is a term-of-art in Arendtian philosophy. It is a never-ending process, "begin[ing] with birth and end[ing] with death"³. Arendt, always demanding close attention by the reader to how she defines words, defines understanding as the process of finding meaning in our world.⁴ She further elaborates that "understanding is based on

¹ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 328

² Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Essays in Political Thought*, 146

³ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 308

⁴ *Ibid*, 309

knowledge and knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding”.⁵ Understanding “precedes and succeeds knowledge” and is “unending and therefore cannot produce final results”.⁶ Those who would rather understand politics as being event-based instead of being process-based will only be met with gloom by her assertion that finality eludes us. Arendt cautions against despair in the beginning when she writes “Many people say that one cannot fight totalitarianism without understanding it. Fortunately this is not true; if it were, our case would be hopeless” but still ultimately concludes that we “cannot expect to understand [totalitarianism] definitively as long as it has not definitively been defeated”.⁷ We may be able to fight totalitarianism, but since understanding is never-ending, that means totalitarianism will never be fully understood, and is thus always something that will forever haunt humanity.

Even if the complete eradication of totalitarianism and radical realization of freedom is impossible, it doesn’t mean that fighting it is always a “hopeless enterprise”. Here I am reminded of a contrasting definition of freedom proposed by Slavoj Žižek in his work “In Defense of Lost Causes”. Žižek is heavily influenced by Arendt, and it is evident from his rejection of freedom as free-will (what he calls freedom of choice) and allusion to a Greek city state:

Freedom is not something given, it is regained through a hard struggle in which one should be ready to risk everything. Spartan ruthless military discipline is not simply the opposite of Athenian “liberal democracy,” it is its inherent condition, it lays the foundation for it [...] True freedom is not a freedom of choice made from a safe distance, like choosing between a strawberry cake and

⁵ Ibid, 311

⁶ Ibid, 308

⁷ Ibid, 309

a chocolate cake true freedom overlaps with necessity, one makes a truly free choice when one's choice puts at stake one's very existence—one does it because one simply “cannot do otherwise.”⁸

Maybe Arendt would disregard Zizek as “just another Marxist”, but one cannot deny that these parallels are striking. Arendt sees freedom is being rooted in the natality of man and necessity of worldly action, whereas Zizek sees it as being rooted in the necessity of accounting for necessity itself. They both conclude that freedom is a given to all humans by virtue of their existence.

Despite similar conclusions, Arendt would certainly reject Zizek's specific formulation of freedom here on the grounds that Zizek (like the other Marxists) conflates work and labor. *And elevates labor above both work and action.* Arendt believes that the kinds of emancipation from labor that Marxists desire will only be found “through technology”⁹, and as a result, that the Marxist preoccupation with liberation from labor is counterproductive. This would be consistent, except that she concedes that liberation is likely a pre-requisite for freedom: “It may be a truism to say that liberation and freedom are not the same; that liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it”.¹⁰ *(Sine qua non rather than conditio per quam)*

Arendt has now made several bold and contentious claims, namely that current technology cannot produce enough to give every human a comfortable existence, that liberation is the condition for freedom, and only technology will be our source of liberation from necessity. Liberation, unlike the search for understanding, is not a process insofar as it has worldly conditions that objectively demarcate its status of completion (necessity met) or failure

⁸ Zizek, *In defense of Lost Causes*, 60

⁹ Mundi, *Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* 32

¹⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 30

(necessity not met). Even in her time, the amount of food being produced around the world far outpaced the number of mouths that needed to be fed, yet poverty remained. Arendt closes her only door out of such an inconsistency by specifically arguing that this “emancipation, as we know now, to the extent that it is possible at all, occurs not by political emancipation -- the > equality of all classes of the citizenry, but by technology.”¹¹ Arendt doesn’t see the political realm of action and laws as having anything to do with the realm of labor, as though it is anything except political pragmatism that prevents ourselves from evenly distributing the world’s food supplies. *Compare On Rev. which contrasts liberty with positive freedom.*

To be fair, this paper is analyzing a small subset of Arendt’s work, and it is possible that my criticisms are answered far more eloquently than I have given her credit for in subsequent writings, but given the above textual evidence, Arendt seems to be implying that capitalism’s inequalities are inescapable. Not even a society with true “political equality” could find a way to equalize the distribution of necessities in such a way to reduce the labor process enough to allow freedom to appear. One wonders how Arendt would respond to the range of non-authoritarian collectivist authors who were pragmatic enough to recognize that labor itself may never disappear, but that liberation can be found through a more fair political organization than the current one. Would Arendt claim that anarcho-socialists do not desire a new politics? Can she cite examples of systemic terror committed by anarchists? For someone so critical of Marx’s preoccupation with the primacy of labor, Arendt appears to fail to truly separate > freedom from necessity, and instead places her faith in technology. This faith seems especially misguided given her criticisms of man’s inability to even discuss modern science or technology

¹¹ Mundi, *Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* 32

Moreover, it can be disputed whether technology can succeed in resolving the social question.

with lay-persons. Technology cannot be non-political if it is the pre-requisite for the expression of freedom that allowed for its creation in the first place. We cannot just “go back” to a time before the internet. Technology without a human utilizing it may be “pre-political” in her vocabulary, but the active usage of it is as much a part of the human spirit as is our desire to reproduce and create new beings.

↳ I don't think her claim is that the political world would not be concerned with anything technology but rather that politics is not itself a technological problem.

Arendt engages directly with many of these Marxist style articulations of freedom as liberation in *On Revolution*, and in doing so outlines freedom's paradoxical separation from and constitution by necessity.

For violence can indeed be easily understood as a function or a surface phenomenon of an underlying and overruling necessity, but necessity, which we invariably carry with us in the very existence of our bodies and their needs, can never be simply reduced to and completely absorbed by violence and violation. It was the scientist in Marx, and the ambition to raise his 'science' to the rank of natural science, whose chief category then was still necessity, that tempted him into the reversal of his own categories. Politically, this development led Marx into an actual surrender of freedom to necessity¹²

Now, freedom is defined in terms of the “underlying and overruling” necessity which all humans experience. What's especially interesting here is that Arendt claims that the point of “surrender of freedom to necessity” for Marx was the moment that he claimed that his work was falsifiable and a result of historical forces that could be analyzed like any other science. Arendt thus views freedom as being outside of the realm of explanation by a pure science, which focuses on accumulation of knowledge in our world in such a way that it can be simultaneously described by events with clear demarcations and as a process with no end. Arendt's freedom is as guaranteed by virtue of existence as is poverty in the human experience.

¹² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 65

Arendt proposes more consistent definitions of freedom in her other writings. I have hitherto claimed that Arendt inadvertently defined freedom as not being ever-present due to “liberations [status as] the condition of freedom” and it ends up being the task of the reader (and this paper) to unify this definition with her other characterizations of freedom into an all-encompassing understanding. Arendt defines freedom again in the margins of her essay *Understanding and Politics*:

“If we have a chance to save anything from the conflagration in which we are caught, then certainly it can be only those essentials which are even more basic than the fundamentals of law and the texture of tradition and morality which is woven about them. These essentials can say no more than that Freedom is the quintessence of the human condition and that Justice is the quintessence of man's social condition, or, in other words, that Freedom is the essence of the human individual and Justice the essence of men's living together. Both can disappear from the earth only with the physical disappearance of the human race”¹³

Here, freedom is an essence. All humans possess it in-so-far as humans are social creatures who are compelled to action around and among other humans. In theory, the supposed “disappearance of the human race” could happen while still retaining living humans on the planet. In light of her above definition of totalitarianism, Arendt may even claim that this would be our fate in a world where totalitarianism became ubiquitous (a fate that looked all too possible for humans during the worst years of World War 2). In this view, freedom is only experienced as action in the world insofar as the ability for it to be denied means that it is not an innate quality that all humans possess, rather humans are seen as the possibility of freedom itself.

¹³ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 323

Arendt admires Kant for his “insight that freedom is no more ascertainable to the inner sense and within the field of inner experience than it is to the senses with which we know and understand the world”.¹⁴ Further, she praises Kant for his recognition of the distinction between the “theoretical reason” and the “practical reason”, which she claims is analogous to her own distinction between free-will and freedom. In Augustinian Tradition, Arendt deduces that “thought itself in its pre-scientific and pre-philosophical understanding [...] seems to dissolve freedom”.¹⁵ Just as Augustine conceived of free-will based on the recognition of its turmoil, Arendt again defines freedom based on what threatens its worldly existence.

Her Kantian formulation of freedom does not imply that the action of thinking leads to totalitarianism itself, but rather claims that the “*vita contemplativa*” rejects the action necessary to prevent it and opens the space up for freedom’s radical negation. Withdrawing outside of the realm of actions means rejecting politics, causing its dissolution. This is why the healthiest democratic societies have high voter participation, and indeed, Arendt sees Athens with its relatively universal suffrage as being a bastion of freedom relative to its time. For this reason, thinking is still vital to the process of acting in the world, but action must always be seen as a pre-requisite for freedom. *Even that action is freedom*

Arendt outs herself as sympathetic to deontological ethics later in her essay *What is Freedom*. When Kant makes the distinction between the two reasons, she claims “This solution, pitting the dictate of the will against the understanding of reason, is ingenious enough and may even suffice to establish a moral law whose logical consistency is in no way inferior to natural

¹⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Essays in Political Thought*, 145

¹⁵ Ibid 144

this is very qualified praise on her part.
laws.”¹⁶ This claim is very strange considering her praise for political pluralism. Even leaving the possibility open for a universal moral law presupposes an ethical imperative to carry it out by virtue of its truthfulness (If not, then what is the point of ethics? Are there wrongs that we have no imperative to right if we know for sure what is right?). In this regard, one could argue that the realm of politics would become “obsolete” insofar as the creation of new laws outside of this universal moral law would become unnecessary.

Arendt thus complicates the question of freedom by giving several seemingly paraconsistent formulations of it in terms of what it is not. Freedom is not the same as liberation, though liberation “may be the condition of freedom”, and it is not found in a passive life which shuns politics, the *vita contemplativa*. It is not the radical denial of taking action in the political sphere: totalitarianism. Freedom thus is not guaranteed to all (because totalitarianism’s possibility threatens it), but is continuously recreated via the process of affirming itself against its own denial, a “hopeless enterprise” only to those who desire the eventual end of action and thus creation.

I think Arendt's worry has to do with the tendency to reduce politics to concerns with production and necessity. She isn't claiming that political action would not take material conditions into account, or be unconcerned with such conditions.

Fine work!

GRADE A

¹⁶ Ibid 145