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*The Unique and Its Responsibility* - How Politics complicates Freedom and Responsibility

In her essay about personal responsibility, Arendt observes that “during the postwar period in Germany those who personally were completely innocent assured each other and the world at large how guilty they felt, while very few of the criminals were prepared to admit even the slightest remorse”[[1]](#footnote-1). Most of us experience parallel situations regularly within the realm of politics. The recent difference in treatment between US Senators Al Franken and Roy Moore illustrates this point. Given that we collectively live in such a perverse state of affairs, the question of freedom’s relation to politics resurfaces again and again. How can we properly ascribe abstract concepts like “responsibility” and “guilt” to freely acting individuals? What do we do when the guilty cannot be made to feel guilty, yet the innocent wrongfully feel guilty?

One can see this misguided phenomenon in action when the political situation turns unfavorable to the majority of the population that “thinks” and “uses their conscience”, as happened with the election of Donald Trump. Since his election, the Democratic Party is now more divided than at any point in the last 100 years. While Arendt did not know about our current political situation, she warns readers about the consequences of incorrectly ascribing personal responsibility to those who do not deserve it, even going so far as to call any non-Nazi German who felt guilty about the holocaust flat out “wrong”[[2]](#footnote-2). Thus, “collective guilt” to Arendt is an oxymoron. Concepts like “The German people” are not capable of being held collectively guilty, because not all German people participated in the Holocaust. Some even fought valiantly against it’s horrors.

Arendt’s analysis of the deployment of “lesser evil” thinking as a political weapon of totalitarian governments is fascinating. She claims that “those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil” and elaborates that “if we look at the techniques of totalitarian government, it is obvious that the argument of ‘the lesser evil’ […] is one of the mechanisms built into the machinery of terror and criminality”.[[3]](#footnote-3)While Trump is no Hitler, the normalization of his tactics and politics is certainly happening in our society, and Arendt might equate his tacit calls for violence against subaltern populations as the “conscious conditioning” which precedes a more general shift in the body politic at large.

This normalization is particularly malicious, because it takes advantage of our tendency as humans to rely on heuristics and legalism when making ethical decisions. The ability to judge, specifically a faculty “that judges in full spontaneity every deed and intent anew whenever the occasion arises”[[4]](#footnote-4), is viewed by Arendt as either not existing, or potentially existing, but still being easily ignored by the general population. Despite the non-universality of this faculty, we will see that Arendt believes that we possess some kind of “collective” responsibility to use it, because a failure to do-so risks blindly committing atrocities without seeing them as atrocities, as happens when the state reverses the traditional legal system:

when they are held responsible, what we actually require of them is a "feeling of lawfulness" deep within themselves to contradict the law of the land and their knowledge of it. Under such circumstances there may be considerably more required than an eye not blind and a heart not stony and corrupt in order to spot "unlawfulness." They acted under conditions in which every moral act was illegal and every legal act was a crime[[5]](#footnote-5)

Here, freedom is tied with responsibility in a Hegelian sense. One becomes responsible for judging what actions are ultimately acceptable, and this responsibility is an act of freedom itself, but places limitations on the potential acts committable by a free person, limiting free-will. Freedom is now intimately tied to the survival of politics itself, and we are responsible for its preservation because “we cannot do otherwise”.

Arendt acknowledges that such a definition of responsibility sounds silly, but only due to etymological circumstances, “But if we understand by law either commands which I must obey or the necessity of nature to which I am subject anyhow, then the term "law of freedom" is a contradiction in terms.”[[6]](#footnote-6). If we choose to agree with this formulation of freedom, then we concede that freedom is paradoxical when we substitute “free-will” back again for “freedom”. At this point, Arendt isn’t so sure that we can say anything conclusively at all: “The question then is, can I be said to be free, uncoerced by others or by necessity, if I do what I will not […] Now this question of whether or not men are free when they start to act cannot be demonstrably resolved”[[7]](#footnote-7)**.**

Arendt claims that totalitarianism is the “the most radical denial of freedom”[[8]](#footnote-8), and since “The raison d'etre of politics is freedom”[[9]](#footnote-9), Arendt is prudent to attack “lesser-evilism” as the harbinger of fascism. For Arendt, The genocides committed by the Nazis didn’t occur due to “raving sadists”[[10]](#footnote-10), but because those who do not think, a sizeable chunk of the population, are all too easily swayed by the allure of belonging in a group, and when the “cornerstone of this "new law" [now] consisted of the command "Thou shalt kill"[[11]](#footnote-11), these vacuous people became the foot soldiers of one of the most terrible regimes that the earth has ever seen.

Arendt’s praise of the non-participants, that is, those who “refused to murder, not so much because they still held fast to the command ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ but because they were unwilling to live together with a murderer-themselves”[[12]](#footnote-12) is fascinating, given that these non-participants gave up political freedom in exchange for retaining some semblance of a so called “Free-will”. By being unwilling to surrender the ability to engage in a silent dialogue with the friendly self, one freely chooses not to be personally responsible for the atrocities of the world around them. Here, free-will is again, conflated with freedom.

Unfortunately, being un-willing to murder has its downsides. Arendt may claim that “more reliable will be the doubters and skeptics, not because skepticism is good or doubting wholesome, but because they are used to examine things and to make up their own minds”[[13]](#footnote-13), but this is much too naïve. Absent from her criticisms of the moral hypocrisy of the so called “respectable” society is an account of those who were all too often the first to be slaughtered at the hands of the Nazis: the (usually) left-wing people whose ideologies can broadly be summed up as “anti-fascist”. In order to take up direct arms against the Nazi’s, as did the resistance fighters, one has to come to terms with possibly of being a “murderer”, even if that murder is for a “better” cause. The Nazi regimes brutality was only ended by the courageous acts of murder committed by untold numbers of Americans, British, French, Russians, etc. No matter how just the actions are of those who stopped the Nazis, a grave number of innocents were sacrificed for this so-called “greater good”[[14]](#footnote-14).

Since Arendt views the ability to doubt and be skeptical as kryptonite for the enemy of freedom–totalitarianism--one can say that we have a responsibility to use our faculties to think, to judge, and to doubt the world around us. Unfortunately, even such sacred concepts as morality don’t motivate the populace to use these faculties. Arendt observes how morality devolved back into its original meaning during Hitler’s rise: “Morality collapsed into a mere set of mores-manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will-not with criminals, but with ordinary people”[[15]](#footnote-15). Arendt was diligent to praise the “skeptics and doubters” of morality, but did not go so far as to reject the concept of morality outright. The Egoist author Max Stirner beat her by about 100 years in observing how hollow morality is:

The case of morality is like that of the family. Many a man renounces morals, but with great difficulty the conception, “morality.” Morality is the “idea” of morals, their intellectual power, their power over the conscience; on the other hand, morals are too material to rule the mind, and do not fetter an “intellectual” man, a so-called independent, a “freethinker.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Arendt, to be sure, would be horrified at the idea of abandoning all principles, especially morality, but Stirner makes compelling arguments for why free political expression (i.e. freedom) is difficult when we hold onto any principles, and advocates for radical nominalism

But whoso is full of sacred (religious, moral, humane) love loves only the spook, the “true man,” and persecutes […] the individual, the real man, […] for love to the spook or generality commands him to hate him who is not ghostly, i.e. the egoist or individual;[[17]](#footnote-17)

Stirner even goes on to explain exactly how blind faith in these sacred ideas impairs ones ability to engage in this silent dialogue with the self:

one owes nothing to his essence and that of others. Intercourse resting on essence is an intercourse with the spook, not with anything real. If I hold intercourse with the supreme essence, I am not holding intercourse with myself, and, if I hold intercourse with the essence of man, I am not holding intercourse with men. [[18]](#footnote-18)

While Arendt is no Egoist, she would certainly respect the skepticism inherent to this thought, and concedes that disavowing ourselves of fixed ideas doesn’t prevent us from confronting our collective responsibility to live with others in the world: “no moral, individual and personal, standards of conduct will ever be able to excuse us from collective responsibility”[[19]](#footnote-19).

Arendt inadvertently concedes that all attempts living in organized society are discriminatory in nature, and further, defends this discrimination as being somehow necessary: “At any rate, without discrimination of some sort, society would simply cease to exist and very important possibilities of free association and group formation would disappear”[[20]](#footnote-20). Here, she cannot possibly conceive of free political association as being divorced from a responsibility not just to act within a world of others, but indeed, to discriminate those others! Stirner again fills in this missing commentary: “Against the egoists ‘human society’ is wrecked; for they no longer have to do with each other as men, but appear egoistically as an I against a You altogether different from me and in opposition to me”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Even if Arendt is innocent of what one might call a defense of oppression, her insistence that thinking is a prerequisite for judgement (which is itself a prerequisite for action) leads to her concluding that we have a responsibility to think, which is itself a responsibility to preserve our freedom: “When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action”[[22]](#footnote-22). Her assertion that “[thinking] actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its byproduct”[[23]](#footnote-23) is awfully reminiscent of Sartre’s phenomenology and indeed sounds like a fluffy reformulation of *Cogito Ergo Sum* into *Cogito, Ergo Sum Non Criminalibus.[[24]](#footnote-24)*,. Arendt may have unwittingly slipped into the same “distortion” inherent to Western Philosophy that she tries to warn us about in her essay *What is Freedom*, specifically that “[we] distorted […] freedom […] by transposing it from its original field, the realm of politics and human affairs […] to an inward domain”[[25]](#footnote-25) . This time, the “inward domain” was not the will, but rather was the silent dialogue with the self from thinking, which is formulated as being the prerequisite for politics itself. Descartes is surely laughing in his grave.

Stirner would also find this love of thinking comical. Our attachment to the ability to think, and specifically to judge, is the ball and chain that imprisons ourselves into the realm of appearances, essences, and spooks – the unreal.

“ So he wants to break up thoughts by thinking; but I say, only thoughtlessness really saves me from thoughts. It is not thinking, but my thoughtlessness, or I the unthinkable, incomprehensible, that frees me from possession […] for “I,” from whom I start, am not a thought, nor do I consist in thinking. Against me, the unnameable, the realm of thoughts, thinking, and mind is shattered.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Arendt’s own thinking tends to idolize the natality inherent to the plural *Man*. Natality is natality precisely because it creates something that did not exist before – something unique, something *unnameable*. Arendt comes so close to making the logical leaps necessary to conclude similarly, but ends up succumbing to Platonic realism instead.

Arendt, much unlike Stirner, is unconvinced that we can truly exist as individuals unencumbered by others: “We can escape this political and strictly collective responsibility only by leaving the community, and since no man can live without belonging to some community, this would simply mean to exchange one community for another and hence one kind of responsibility for another”[[27]](#footnote-27). Arendt even goes as far as to claim that anyone who existed outside of “some community”, namely, a state would be “Collectively Innocent” under this formulation. If Arendt could be convinced by Stirner that the voluntary nature of his proposed “Union of Egoists” would fit this category, then she might agree that the Anarchists and Egoists would be Collectively Innocent. Now responsibility is a “cost” of living as a free individual in a will-encumbering society. One can reject to pay this cost by existing outside of it, as do the radical individualists. Arendt and Stirner now only disagree about the possibility of existing as an individual unencumbered by others.

Arendt thus complicates the concepts of Responsibility and Freedom by claiming that they are results of our ability to think and judge. This is an updated formulation over her previous ones which focus on the natality and potential in humankind. Freedom in this sense is still political, but only in a vague sense of “We should think hard enough that we can judge what is good properly”. I have hitherto used another author, Max Stirner, to illustrate the bounds of Arendt’s thought, and to highlight points of departure from her system. His radical thought allows us to probe and examine the limits of her concepts of freedom, responsibility, and politics. Understanding something by conceiving of what it is not is a distinctly Arendtian approach to analysis. This responsibility to think, radically complicates our relationship with freedom. Arendt would thus conclude that “thought itself in its pre-scientific and pre-philosophical understanding […] seems to dissolve freedom”[[28]](#footnote-28). Given this definition, Stirner and Arendt have finally agreed upon something: anyone who calls themselves a “free-thinker” is a fool.

1. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding,* 328 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Essays in Political Thought*, 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I think that the scenes of conscripted foreigners trying to surrender to the Americans getting shot from Band of Brothers illustrate my point here nicely [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/max-stirner-the-ego-and-his-own>, no pg #s [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 206 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Stirner, *The Ego and its Own* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 189 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid, 189 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. What I got when I google translated “I think, therefor I am not a criminal” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Essays in Political Thought*, 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Stirner, *The Ego and its Own* [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Essays in Political Thought*, 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)