



Lecture 13: Arendt on Politics, Truth and Ethics



Introduction and background

Hannah Arendt is one of the most influential thinkers in the 20th Century. She did not want to call herself a philosopher, but her writing covers a wide range of philosophical discussions about politics and ethics.

Born a Jew in Germany, Arendt experienced and predicted the Nazis' rise to power. Her interest in politics, she says, was triggered by the illegal arrests of Jews in 1933. Arendt fled to France, and later became stateless when she lost her German citizenship and was sent to a concentration camp in 1937. She escaped and arrived America as a refugee in 1941.

Influences from Greek philosophy

Arendt saw Socrates as a model philosopher because of the way he engaged with other people in public spaces. By engaging the citizens of Athens in philosophical dialogue and reflection, and listening to their views and arguments, he was living Arendt's ideal of *plurality*.

Plurality is what Arendt calls a fact of the human condition: we are all different, with our unique experiences, viewpoints and stories. By engaging openly and actively in the marketplace of ideas, we become political agents and actualise our potentials as what Aristotle called *zoon politikon* (political animal).

For Arendt, a life of contemplation ought to be done together, as a community. Like Socrates, we must expose ourselves to other perspectives in order to form good judgements. Unlike ideology, where a fixed view is accepted and plurality denied, critical thinking requires inter-subjectivity.

This is not a relativist perspective, but more a Kantian perspectivist one. We have to see the world from our own lenses, which doesn't mean that there is nothing real to see. At the basis of critical thinking is factual truths. By sharing and listening to each other's stories, we maintain *the fabric of humanity*: the fact that *we all share and inhabit this world together*.

Totalitarianism and organised lying

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1950, Arendt explores some common preconditions and strategies of two apparently very different totalitarian governments: the right-wing Nazism and the left-wing Stalinism. She discusses how people are turned into masses, and the role of propaganda, censorship and terror in totalitarian regimes. This dehumanises us.

When humans become disconnected from each other, and societies are replaced with masses, humans become isolated, lonely and self-centered. Individuals become an instrument for ideology, rather than political agents. Propaganda is used to make people distrust their own stories and experiences.

By repeating a lie, people start questioning their own reality. In 'Truth and politics', from 1967, Arendt talks about what she refers to as 'organised lying', done by vast interest organisations or government institutions. It is the mass manipulation of facts, including rewriting of history. Organised lying affects our capacity to think, judge and act:

The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can

you have an opinion if you are not informed? If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie... but you get a great number of lies... And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please. (Arendt in [an interview from 1974](#))

Statelessness and the refugee crisis

Arendt saw the problem of statelessness as a paradox in the universal human rights declaration. It requires states to protect the rights of all humans, but clashes with the modern principle of national sovereignty. The only rights we have, she says, are those given us by the state. Once we lack a state, we also lack rights. Arendt argues that we need 'the right to have rights', also outside of the political community.

Every attempt... to establish some legal status for stateless people failed because no agreement could possibly replace the territory to which an alien, within the framework of existing law, must be deportable. All discussions about the refugee problems revolved around this one question: How can the refugee be made deportable again? (Origins, p. 284)

...the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people. And what happened in Palestine ... was then repeated in India on a large scale involving many millions of people. (Origins, p. 290)

The banality of evil

Arendt's most controversial work is *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published in The New Yorker in 1963. She was covering the trial of Nazi colonel, Adolf Eichmann, who had administered the identification and transportation of Jews to concentration camps. Her writing includes philosophical reflections of the concept of evil.

Arendt wanted to understand how a sane person could take part in Holocaust, with mass torture and murders. She challenged the idea of radical evil: that evil is something monstrous or inhumane. Eichmann, as she observed him, was not a monster and he was not driven by hatred toward Jews.

The reality of evil, Arendt argued, is that it is carried out by ordinary people. It does not require an evil will, but is caused by human fault, such as vice, dogma, misinformation and prejudice. She separated 'deed' from 'doer'. An evil deed does not necessarily imply an evil doer.

By talking about the 'banality' of evil, Arendt was not saying that the evil deeds are ordinary, forgivable or trivial, but this is how she was interpreted. It was banal in the sense that there was not moral reflection or consideration involved in the action. Eichmann lacked empathy and the ability to consider how his crimes affected others. He chose to follow orders, and he chose not to think. There were no evil intentions behind it.

Discussion questions

What did Arendt mean by plurality?

Why did she see plurality as so important?

How would you compare Arendt's view of plurality to relativism?

How did Arendt see the relationship between an individual and society?

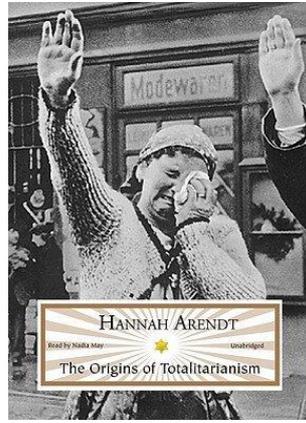
Why did Arendt see political engagement as so important?

What are some of the elements and mechanisms of totalitarianism that Arendt finds in common for both Nazism and Stalinism?

The *Origins of Totalitarianism* has gotten much attention in the last few years. Which parts of Arendt's thinking do you see as relevant today and why?

What is Arendt's view on evil and in what sense is it 'banal'? Do you agree with her views?

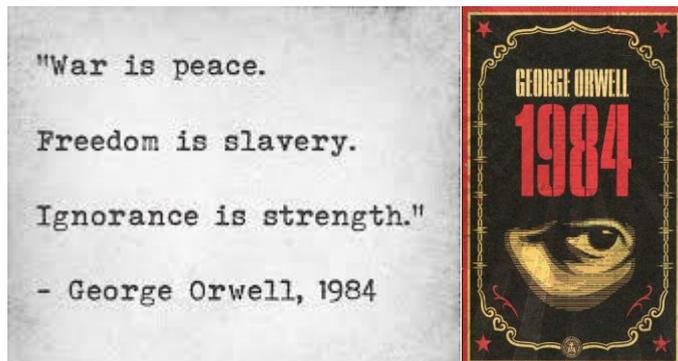
What do you think of her distinction between 'deed' and 'doer'?



Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)

Organised lying and doublespeak

Compare the Nazi motto 'Arbeit Macht Frei' (Work Sets You Free) with the motto of Oceania in Orwell's book *1984*.



The party uses 'doublespeak' as a tool of oppression, dissolving logic through explicit contradictions: The Ministry of Peace oversees war, the Ministry of Love carries out the torture of political prisoners and serve as police, and the Ministry of Truth is in charge of changing the content in history books and the news.



Photo: Michael Gaida for Pixabay

We need rights to have rights, Arendt says.

Boris Johnson warns migrants attempting to cross to UK will be 'sent back'

May Bulman Social Affairs Correspondent | @maybulman | Friday 23 August 2019 20:11 | comments



On 9 August, three of 20 people on a small boat headed to the UK were reported to have gone overboard by HM Coastguard. Two were rescued, but an Iranian woman's body was not found (AFP)

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/calais-crossings-channel-refugees-migrants-uk-home-office-a9076636.html>