



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 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 unique experiences, viewpoints and stories. We are also *both biological and political*. By engaging openly and actively in the marketplace of ideas, we become political agents, what Aristotle called *zoon politikon* (political animal).

For Arendt, a life of contemplation ought to be done together, as a community. We must expose ourselves to plural perspectives, the way Socrates did, in order to form good judgements. Critical thinking requires inter-subjectivity, unlike ideology, where one accepts and promotes a fixed view.

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 how totalitarian governments, such as Nazism and Stalinism, gain power. She discusses the loss of political agency when people are transformed into masses and dehumanised, and the role of propaganda, censorship and terror in totalitarian regimes.

Totalitarianism can arise when humans feel disconnected from each other and become politically indifferent. When people feel isolated and lonely, they can become an instrument for ideology and vulnerable to any powerful narrative that can explain why they are unhappy. Totalitarianism reduces people to mere biological beings, not political actors.

Propaganda is a form of what Arendt calls 'organised lying' in 'Truth and politics', from 1967. It is the mass manipulation of facts, including rewriting of history, done by vast interest organisations or government institutions. By repeating a lie, people start questioning their own reality. 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 was deeply concerned with statelessness, which she saw as a paradoxical failure to secure universal human rights. The 1948 declaration requires states to protect the rights of all humans, but states have national sovereignty. The only rights we have are those given us by the state. Once we lack a state, we lack rights. We thus need 'the right to have rights'.

The only way to have access to political institutions, is by belonging to a place. Statelessness is a form of large-scale homelessness, where one belongs nowhere. When people lose access to political rights, they also lose the possibility to influence their own situation. Stateless people are displaced and deported.

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. (Origins, p. 290)

The banality of evil

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

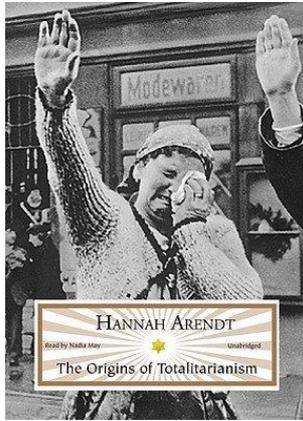
Arendt wanted to understand how a sane person could take part in Holocaust, with mass torture and murders. She challenged the idea of radical evil: that evil is something monstrous or inhumane. Eichmann, however, seemed to her quite average, not driven by extreme ideology or a hatred towards Jews.

The reality of evil, Arendt argued, is that it is carried out by ordinary people. She separated 'deed' from 'doer'. Evil deeds don't necessarily imply an evil doer, or an evil will. Evil is caused by human fault: vice, dogma, misinformation and prejudice.

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

Discussion questions

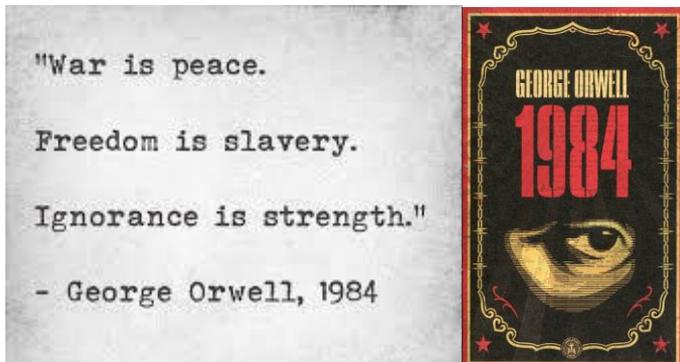
- What did Arendt mean by plurality?
- Why did she see plurality as so important?
- How would you compare Arendt's view of plurality to relativism?
- How did Arendt see the relationship between an individual and society?
- Why did Arendt see political engagement as so important?
- What are some of the common elements and mechanisms of totalitarianism that Arendt finds?
- 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)

**Arendt and Orwell:
organised lying and doublespeak**

Compare the Nazi motto on the gate to Auschwitz, 'Arbeit Macht Frei' (Work Sets You Free), with the motto of the dystopian totalitarian state, Oceania, in Orwell's book 1984:



In the book, 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 torture of political prisoners and serve as police.
- The Ministry of Truth is in charge of changing the content in history books and the news.

We need 'the right to have rights'

<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2019/07/12/hannah-arendt-right-to-have-rights/>

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)

A news clip from *The Independent*, 23 August 2019

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



"Totalitarian movements are possible wherever there are masses who for one reason or another have acquired the appetite for political organization. Masses are not held together by a consciousness of common interest and they lack that specific class articulateness which is expressed in determined, limited, and obtainable goals. The term masses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organizations or trade unions. Potentially, they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls."

– Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*



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Conflict is often rooted in the denial of human rights, from discrimination against minorities to inequality & injustice.

Protecting minorities & promoting their economic, social, cultural, civil & political rights are among the most important conflict prevention tools we have.

3:00 AM · Mar 1, 2022 · Twitter Web App

The 'right to have rights' is here emphasised by the United Nations' Secretary-General, António Guterres

<https://twitter.com/antonioguterres>