

For the sake of the good: id es, of truth (science [not technology]); beauty (art); love (intellectuals as 'love of the world')

I. My background

A. Greek philosophy, ethics: interest in Arendt is ethical – the nature of thinking; of thinking about the human life.

1. Eaglestone, in his talk: “She doesn’t talk about ethics very much.”

B. Integrity project: the institutional, social and psychological preconditions for integrity and consequences of lacking it.

II. “The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective.” (OT, ‘RoM’, 296-97)

A. This is not something anyone can just seize; the conditions for it are not completely under an individual’s control

1. But be recognized in order to be so

2. Recognition requires particularization

– “The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships – except that they were still human. **The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.**” (OT, ‘RoM’, 300)

B. To be recognizably human, one must belong to some community or another. It is this community, I want to suggest, which enables persons to imagine (or disables us from imagining) forms of the fine for the sake of which to act and speak freely.

1. It is *because* it enables us to conceive of the fine in some way or another that it creates the space within which persons can take a place, and so engage in significant speech and effective action.

2. Because humans are distinguished to each other from other animals by their ability to conceive of a fineness that is not determined by biological necessity, some distinct community and language through which to conceive and articulate some particular form of fineness or another is necessary for us to recognize each other as human.

III. Freedom from Necessity: The political and the private.

A. Familiar and apt in Arendt’s account of the Greeks, particularly of the Athenians

1. That freedom is a quite distinct and foremost good;

2. that this freedom is freedom from necessity;

3. that the ‘necessity’ from which the free person is free is biological necessity, and everything that pertains to it.

- B. Arendt relies especially on Aristotle in making the distinction. But it is in Aristotle that it is perhaps clearest that freedom is not just freedom *from* necessity. The freedom that could be worthwhile, that it could possibly be worth organizing the whole of life (both private and public) around, is freedom to act, speak and think *for the sake of the fine*.
1. Arendt picks this up of course, in her references to ‘saying great words and doing great deeds’ (e.g. HC, 35 ‘the shining exposure of great deeds’) – For the freedom of a *polis*, Arendt writes (HC, 30), ‘for the freedom of world’ (HC, 31) of *having* a world, not the world’s freedom). But this bland formulation suffers the same defect as the naked human: it offers us no sense in which words and deeds *can* be ‘great’. What is ‘greatness’ in speech and action? This is especially acute for us today, because lack of any conception of greatness – of what would make action a fine one, what sort of words are noble to speak – makes us unwilling to acknowledge that this could be a criterion or a desideratum of political life today.
 2. What Arendt’s account also leaves out is that there was dissent and confusion within the Greek world, within Athenian public discourse and practice, precisely over what one was free *for* when one was free *from* necessity. This can be cast as a debate over what was the truly ‘fine’ or noble state for one to aspire to.
 - In the background is the greatness of Achilles: Even if his greatness consists partly in his ability to command speech in an effective and inspiring way, it is not incidental that this speech stirs one with its appreciation of and lust for glory, a particularly martial good.
 - a. Odysseus was acknowledged to be able to speak well; but he was not heroic, and not great. He was a trickster, using his words and wiles to evade demonstrating the superiority in battle and direct confrontation required for glory.
 - b. Achilles was great because Hector was great, and he overcame Hector. Yes, because he was willing to risk his life to demonstrate this superiority – this courage is not irrelevant; but the contest, and winning it, is the primary thing. The Trojans were great, and so the Greeks who overcame them even greater, because they could risk their lives and defeat the enemy in battle. This is an ineliminably martial conception of the ‘fine’, and there is no requirement that the ‘cause’ for which one fights be an especially noble one, ~~according to some other standard of ‘noble’~~. (In fact, fighting over the kidnap of one’s wife was *not* considered a particularly noble cause at all.)
 - It is against this archaic, martial idea of ‘the fine’ that the Greek moralists – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – were reacting. To them, freedom is, on some version or another, the exercise of one’s highest and distinctively human faculties to their fullest. This is *actually* Aristotle’s account of the good for the sake of which the political art arranges things, and this is why war and all its greatness and glory are in fact for the sake of peace, and peace for the sake of contemplation.
 - a. Although she takes her cue so much from Aristotle, and in spite of the fact that she does not say so explicitly, it seems hard to shake the impression that Arendt suffers from a nostalgia for the archaic Greek view when she writes of ‘speaking great words and doing great deeds’ (see her description of the necessarily *agonistic* nature of the Greek *polis*-life she idealises, HC 41) – and that however embedded within her historical discussion, there is ultimately no other conception on offer of what could make actions and words great or fine.

IV. Calliclean self-indulgence cuts across Arendt's categories in an illuminating way: for it is private, but it is in no way bound by necessity or the demands of life. It ought make no claim to be a politically worthy goal, or belong to the domain of freedom properly so called.

A. This was Plato's argument – but he had to argue for it. Arendt's way of distinguishing public/private, and neglecting to consider what any freedom worth the name is *for*, actually makes it harder for us to see why this should be excluded. What is not great and admirable about Callicles' great man, who has the freedom to allow his desires to grow as large as possible and to constantly satisfy them?

1. If we want to deny this is great, or fine, or noble, we need some conception of what is great, fine, noble, worthwhile, admirable; *and*

2. Simply the fact of being free from biological necessity will not suffice here.

– [an afterthought: *Billy Budd* discussion. Arendt wants to positively banish absolute good, orientation towards it, from the realm of the political just as life's necessities are to be banished.]

B. Achilles is no longer inspiring to us as a model of greatness; neither Solon nor Pericles is convincing. What we admire more, what we need most, perhaps, are those who can recover a sense of nobility – something that can make life *meaningful*, instead of just pleasant or unpleasant. This is where a social/political distinction is both helpful and limited.

1. Helpful: We moderns, with our social mentality, are not wrong to think that a more comfortable life – at least the basic comforts of life being as widely distributed as possible – is a communal concern, and a concern of good governance. But this is a subordinate end. Life must be possible before it can become meaningful.

– the 'household' demands of necessity are worth communal attention because they are the precondition for the having any conception at all of the fine – of what makes life meaningful, human, worth living.

– And Arendt acknowledges that “man cannot participate in affairs of the world without a location which [is] properly his own” (*HC*, 29-30); but without attention to the role played by having a conception of the fine, the honourable, the worthy, the good, it is unclear why and how *community* is a precondition of any such place (besides *OT*, 'RoM', see also *HC*, 25).

2. Limited: And yet, the 'social' end is not just instrumentally good to the political end of freedom. Others flourishing 'biologically' – being within a community of people who are not driven by necessity and so have the opportunity to conceive of what life might be *for* – is good for me, *but not biologically*. That is, 'the public good' – that second-rate goal of the equitable distribution of necessities for life – frees people to participate authentically in genuine public discourse and pursuit of the fine. And that there should be wide and multi-vocal participation is part of *my* freedom. Without other participants, my own speech is meaningless, my actions irrelevant, and my freedom non-existent, because the place for such freedom is created by the distance and the discourse between persons.

3. Further, authentic participation requires drawing on – but not being determined by – one's personal, private, social experiences of the human. There is no naked human experience, and no aspiration to such articulation could be intelligible to us. Without drawing on the particular and attempting to bring it to shared articulation, there can be no conceiving of the fine, the noble, the good or great for the sake of which we might speak and act freely. [1841]

this place is more secure, and its freedom finer, the more of the human it can encompass. Community and society: To be recognizably human, one must belong to some community or another – not just a state structure, but a common culture. But even the social is an ineliminable part of this. For, after all, that we all must satisfy the necessities of life *in some way or another* is a *shared* fact about us; and so it is through our having some distinctively human way or another of pursuing these we become recognizably human to one another. It is in general through the particularities that create a shared world between people that we can conceive of the ‘fine’, have articulate and meaningful disputes about it, and reach greater (if incomplete) clarity about the forms it can take.

- And these modes of particularization cannot be neatly circumscribed as ‘public’ and ‘private’
- and it is a concern of everyone that life should be able to have some meaning or another. So it is a concern of everyone to put the preconditions for that in place

Is that too obscure? The idea is to look at the notion that community is the necessary condition for humanity being recognized and being able to come to articulation; that this expression of humanity consists in effective action and significant speech. And then to turn to the public/private distinction, and the ‘social’ which she says cuts unhelpfully across and against this, with the question: What are the institutions, practices and so on which create and enable (or undermine and disable) community in the relevant sense.

If it turns out that she has so defined ‘the political’ that it could - in principle, and not just contingently - never be satisfied, then perhaps we should look again at some of the oppositions (particularly between biological life/necessity and political life/freedom) and see whether there is some way (or some conditions under which) they could be co-ordinated rather than opposed.