

Also a Philosophy of Freedom

The idea of power in the works of Hannah Arendt

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ABSTRACT. For years now as Hannah Arendt's works have been made available they have been growing in popularity: in 2020 the Deutsche Historische Museum in Berlin devoted an exhibition to her entitled "Hannah Arendt and the 20th Century"; in 2018 her posthumously published essay "Die Freiheit, frei zu sein" (the freedom to be free) became a bestseller, and in the same year the first volumes of the critically annotated "Collected Works" appeared; in 2012 Margarethe von Trotta's film "Hannah Arendt" made her familiar to millions of people. In what follows the concept of power will be elucidated as a key feature of Arendt's – and indeed of Western – thinking, while showing that her understanding of the nature of power constitutes a philosophy of freedom no less radical than Rudolf Steiner's.

Keywords: Banality of evil, ethical individualism, natality, philosophy of freedom, pluralism, politics, power, violence

Aspects of power

What power is and what forms it can take is a highly contentious question. In the matter of the concept of power, according to Byung-Chul Han, "theoretical chaos"¹ reigns, chaos to which Han attempts to bring a modicum of order as follows:

Whereas the phenomenon is self-evident, the underlying concept is completely lacking in clarity. Some see it as oppression, others as a manipulative element of communication. The legal, political and sociological notions of power are ranged irreconcilably against each other. One minute it is aligned with freedom, the next with coercive force. For the one it rests upon combined action. For the other it is seen in relation to the struggle. Some sharply distinguish it from violence. For others violence is nothing other than an intensified form of power. On the one hand it is associated with the rule of law, on the other with despotism.²

What remains undisputed, however, is that we are surrounded by, embedded in, shaped by power relationships. We exercise power and then feel powerless in the face of the power of others; or we feel supported by the power of others and unable to cope with our own. What the "self-evidence of the phenomenon" makes clear, however, is this: power seems to be a question of social relationship, about how human beings relate to each other, however this relationship might be individually experienced or conceived.

The German word "Macht" ("power") is derived from the Middle-High German word "math", which in turn goes back to the Old Gothic verb "magan", which more or less means "machen" ("to make") or

1. Byung-Chul Han: 'Was ist Macht?', Stuttgart 2005, p. 7

2. Ibid.

“können” (“can”, “to be able”).³ Thus “Macht” – at least etymologically – has to do with being able to make or do something, with being capable of action. The diversity of meanings carried nowadays by the word “power” has been usefully summarised by Peter Imbusch as follows:

The word Macht [power] designates [...] a) what an individual, a group or humanity in general is capable of, and thus lays stress on the scope of their physical or mental “capabilities”, their stamina or their physical and mental strength; b) someone’s authority in principle and/or in practice over certain things or persons; c) the actual sovereignty of the state or the government, in the sense of the state as power; d) a ruling class, clique or elite; e) the state as a whole, as in expressions like “superpower”, “major power” or “colonial power”; f) last but not least, the effect or potential effect of actual or imagined conditions, qualities or beings, as in “the power of habit”, “of love”, “of reason”, “of the underworld” or “of the gods”.⁴

In what follows I will consider Hannah Arendt’s (1906-1975) attempts to come to terms with the phenomenon of power – a subject to which she devoted essays and books, seminars and lectures all through her life. In so doing I will focus mainly on what she says in “Macht und Gewalt” (“On Violence” 1970) and “Vita activa” (“The Human Condition” 1958/1960), concentrating upon three main areas that Arendt herself paid particularly close attention to: namely, the relationship between power and violence, power and freedom and power and politics. I will then conclude by discussing the extent to which Arendt’s concept of power is based upon a philosophy of freedom and displays a kinship to Rudolf Steiner’s “Philosophy of Freedom” (1894), especially his concept of ethical individualism.

Power and violence

For Hannah Arendt power and violence are not natural, but social phenomena, and for this reason “can never be adequately described in terms of metaphors drawn from the processes of natural life.”⁵ Arendt herself, of course, took considerable pains to arrive at an adequate description – and criticised the political science of her day for “not sufficiently distinguishing between the key concepts of power, strength, force, authority and violence”.⁶

For Arendt power and violence are “different kinds of phenomena”⁷, even though they are often confounded. Arendt therefore demands the abandonment of the assumption “that power and violence are the same, or at least that violence is nothing more than the most extreme manifestation of power”.⁸ For her “power and violence [are] opposites: where the one has absolute command, the other is absent. Violence enters the picture when power is in danger.”⁹ This opposition between power and violence even leads Arendt to exclude any possibility of a transition between them. Between power and violence there are, according to her,

no quantitative or qualitative transitions; power can neither be derived from violence, nor violence from power; neither can power be construed as the gentlest mode of violence, nor violence as the most extreme manifestation of power.¹⁰

And to what extent are power and violence essential to the running of the state, or indeed conditions of human co-existence? In answering this question Arendt also clearly distinguishes between power and violence:

Power is an essential component of the co-operative functioning of the state, indeed, of any organised group, whereas violence is not. The nature of power is instrumental; like all tools it always requires a purpose, which directs and justifies its use.¹¹

3. Cf. Andreas Anter: ‘Theorien der Macht zur Einführung’, Hamburg 2017, p. 14.

4. Peter Imbusch: ‘Macht und Herrschaft in der wissenschaftlichen Kontroverse’, in his (Ed.): ‘Macht und Herrschaft. Sozialwissenschaftliche Theorien und Konzeptionen.’ Wiesbaden 2012, p. 9-35, here p. 10.

5. Hannah Arendt: ‘Macht und Gewalt’, Munich 2015, p. 82

6. Ibid. p. 44

7. Ibid. p. 53

8. Ibid. p. 36

9. Ibid. p. 57

10. Ibid. p. 58

11. Ibid. p. 52

Power is something “absolute”, “of an essential nature”, “it is, as they say, an end-in-itself”.¹² Violence, by contrast, is most closely akin to strength, since the means of violence, like all tools, serve to multiply human strength, or the reach of human limbs”.¹³ From this perspective Arendt sums up what she sees as the extreme cases of power and violence respectively: “The extreme case of power is defined by the constellation; all against one; the extreme case of violence by the constellation: one against all. And the latter is impossible without tools, i.e. the means of violence.”¹⁴

And how do power and violence each present themselves? Under what conditions do they come about? “When we say of someone ‘he has the power’, what we are actually saying”, according to Arendt, “is that he has been authorised by a certain number of people to act on their behalf. The minute the group that granted him that authority [...] dissolves, ‘his power’ vanishes too.”¹⁵ And the emergence of violence? Arendt simply says, “naked violence arises where power has been lost.”¹⁶ And she adds:

It has often been said that powerlessness provokes violence; that those who have no power readily resort to violence, and psychologically this is no doubt correct. Politically speaking it is important to realise that loss of power much sooner leads to violence than powerlessness, as if it could replace the lost power [...], and that violence, precisely because it can actually eliminate power, is always a threat to its own power.¹⁷

In other words: It may well be that, as Arendt says, power and violence cannot be derived from one another, nor can the one be transformed into the other – but “[e]ven the greatest power [...] can be eliminated by violence; out of the gun-barrel comes an ultra-effective order that can command instant, unquestioning obedience. What can never come out of a gun-barrel is power.”¹⁸ – And how does she see the justification or legitimation of power and violence? “Violence [can] be justified, but can never be legitimate. Its justification will make more immediate sense, the nearer the desired goal is.”¹⁹ In other words: “Since violence is by nature instrumental, it appears rational to the extent that it is really helping to achieve the goal that provides its justification.”²⁰ By contrast, power needs

no justification, because it is always already inherent in all human communities. On the other hand, it does require legitimation. Power arises whenever human beings join together and act as one body. Its legitimation does not rest upon the goals a group may have set itself. Its origin is congruent with the founding of the group itself. A claim to power legitimises itself by an appeal to the past, whereas the justification of an instrument of violence is a consequence of a goal that lies in the future.”²¹

While, according to Arendt, power can indeed be eliminated by violence, the reason she gives as to why it now most frequently fails is entirely different: “The cause of power’s demise today lies not so much in violence as in largely anonymous bureaucracy.”²² It is above all bureaucratic rule, the dominion of the apparatus of administration that creates a “disempowerment of power”.²³

To sum up: Arendt’s concept of power demands, according to Andreas Anter, “the radical abandonment of an age-old assumption held to be self-evident²⁴ – namely, that power and violence are one and the same, or that violence is the most intense expression of power. For Arendt power is rather “a sort of cement, that holds a political community together”,²⁵ while, in the widest possible contrast to this, violence denotes “a null-point of power”.²⁶ This “cement”, which power represents, Arendt describes as something that is not static. It

12. Ibid. same page

13. Ibid. p. 47

14. Ibid. p. 43

15. Ibid. p. 45

16. Ibid. p. 55

17. Ibid. p. 55f.

18. Ibid. p. 54

19. Ibid. p. 53

20. Ibid. p. 78

21. Ibid. p. 53

22. Ibid. p. 82

23. Ibid. p. 85

24. Andreas Anter: op. cit., p. 97

25. Ibid. p. 99

26. Ibid. p. 98

is not something “that could be owned or conserved, rather [it is] a phenomenon, that arises through human action, and only exists within the sphere of such action”.²⁷

Power and freedom

Whereas Hannah Arendt takes great pains to draw a clear and sharp distinction between power and violence, she places her concept of freedom in close proximity to that of power – both in a historical and in a (socio-) philosophical sense: “For Montesquieu, as for pre-Christian antiquity and the founders of the American republic, the words ‘power’ and ‘freedom’ were almost synonymous; freedom of movement, the power to go where one wanted, unimpeded by illness or some overlord, was originally the most fundamental freedom, the basis of all others”.²⁸ In another context, she clarified the historical meaning of freedom as political empowerment as follows: “Freedoms in the sense of citizens’ rights are the outcome of emancipation, but in no way can they be construed as the actual substance of freedom, the essential nature of which is access to the public domain and the ability to participate in the business of government.”²⁹ This means that “emancipation [...] is the condition for freedom – even though freedom is not necessarily the outcome of emancipation.”³⁰ Freedom is more than simply emancipation; it only really develops in the course of political action, which must be consciously pursued following emancipation, and which does not arise out of emancipation as a matter of course. – And how then do I experience this freedom – its success and failure, its potentialities and limits?

Essentially I experience freedom and unfreedom in my dealings with others and not with myself. People can only be free in relation to one another, that is, only in the realm of politics and action; only in this way do they experience what freedom is in a positive sense, and that it is more than simply the absence of coercion.³¹

In other words: “While involved in action one is free, not before, and not afterwards, because being involved in action and being free are one and the same.”³² For Arendt freedom does not spring from some contemplative act of personal emancipation. According to her freedom is more a question of a successful – even, if you will – empowering interaction with others:

Political freedom differs from philosophical freedom in that it is clearly a matter of I-can rather than I-will. Since it applies to the citizen and not simply to the human individual, it can only manifest within communities, where there is mutual association in word and deed among all those living together there [...]. In other words, political freedom is only possible in the sphere of human plurality and under the condition that this is not a mere extension of the dual I-and-I to a plural We.³³

With this the limits to the possibility of political power or freedom are also delineated, since each is conditional upon and has its limits set by the existence of the other. This is why Arendt speaks also of the “limitation of power by plurality”³⁴ and decisively rejects a concept of sovereignty that allows for action not with but against one another:

Following on from Jean Bodin and Hobbes, Hannah Arendt sees the idea of sovereignty – in classical terms inseparable from the concept of power – as a form of state rule based on inequality, subjugation and power

27. Ibid. p.94

28. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vom Leben des Geistes. Das Denken. Das Wollen’, Munich 2008, p. 426

29. Hannah Arendt: ‘Die Freiheit, frei zu sein’, Munich 2018, p. 16

30. Ibid.

31. Hannah Arendt: ‘Freiheit und Politik’, in her ‘Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Übungen im politischen Denken I’, Munich 2012, p.201-226, here p. 201

32. Ibid. p. 206.

33. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vom Leben des Geistes’, p. 426. Arendt is emphatic that the “plural We” is entirely different from the “dual I-and-I”: “Action that is perpetually concerned with social change stands in sharpest conceivable contrast to the lonely business of thinking, which involves the individual mind in conversation with itself. In particularly favourable circumstances [...] this dialogue can include someone else, since, as Aristotle says, a friend is, of course, ‘another self’. But this is not to say we have by any means arrived at We, the true plurality of action. (A rather common mistake of modern philosophers [...]) is the opinion that this inner dialogue, this ‘inner action’, which is addressed to one’s own self, or to the ‘other self’ – Aristotle’s friend, Jaspers’ beloved, Buber’s Thou – could serve as an ideal model for the political sphere.” Ibid. p. 426f.

34. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vita activa’ oder ‘Vom tätigen Leben’, Munich 2016, p. 254

of command. Thus for her sovereignty is untenable as regards any theory of action, since it renders political interaction impossible. [...] Power can only arise through the active support of one's opposite number, which contradicts the idea of sovereignty as the power of command.³⁵

In summary it can be said that “in ‘classical’ terms power is concentrated at the apex of the body politic, whereas for Arendt it is distributed throughout the breadth of the political community. According to this interpretation, power is, as it were, shared out, that is, assigned and accessible to a wide variety of participants. Crucial to this view is the threefold constellation of power, action and freedom, since power, for Arendt, is inextricably bound up with action.”³⁶ In other words: “The fundamental phenomenon of power is not the mobilisation of the will of others for one's own ends, but rather the formation of a common will directed towards mutual understanding.”³⁷

This signifies nothing less than the “deconstruction of the modern amalgamation of freedom and sovereignty”³⁸ and means nothing other than that “human existence itself [...] ensures that ‘its freedom is only granted under the conditions of non-sovereignty’”.³⁹ This in no way suggests that all participants in “the formation of a common will” must always be of the same opinion:

Unanimity [is] a possible outcome [of public discourse]. For Arendt, however, what is more important is debate over political issues in the sense of *agreeing to disagree*, in other words, a recognition of the other's position that permits the dispute to continue. Such inter-personal engagement leads to the experience of a political order in which political debate takes place, political freedom is actualised and its actualisation capable of continual renewal.⁴⁰

Christian Dries sums up the essence of Arendt's freedom-based conception of power and/or politics, as follows:

“The meaning of politics is freedom” – the meaning, not the goal, for according to Arendt, politics [...] is not about establishing freedom (in the sense of freedom from coercion or foreign rule) as a state of being, but exclusively about “bringing freedom to expression”; in other words, bringing to manifestation the ontologically inherent ability of human beings to begin something new on their own initiative and to engage in dialogue with each other – action as *initium* and action as *energeia*.⁴¹

Power and politics

Over and above the power-violence and power-freedom relationships, I would now like to continue by throwing some light upon how Arendt sees power in relation to politics: “Power alone is what calls into being and sustains the public domain, the theatre of possible dialogue and action.”⁴² Accordingly, power is the pre-condition for politics, in that it “calls into being and sustains” the political sphere, which for Arendt is also “the area in which people have the chance to exercise and develop their freedom of action, and to distinguish themselves from others.”⁴³

35. Jan Bergner, Janick Banyuaji Ellwein & Tobias Valentin Jerzewski: ‘Macht neu denken. Eine Betrachtung von Hannah Arendts Machtbegriff’, in: ‘360° – Das studentische Journal für Politik und Gesellschaft’ 2/2017, p. 16-27, here p. 19

36. Ibid., p. 21.

37. Jürgen Habermas: ‘Hannah Arendts Begriff der Macht’, in his ‘Philosophisch-politische Profile’, Frankfurt a. M. 1987, p. 228-248, here p. 230.

38. Jürgen Förster: ‘Die Sorge um die Welt und die Freiheit des Handelns. Zur institutionellen Verfassung der Freiheit im politischen Denken von Hannah Arendt’, Würzburg 2009, p. 153

39. Jan Bergner, Janick Banyuaji Ellwein & Tobias Valentine Jerzewski: op. cit. p. 20

40. Thorsten Thiel & Christian Volk: ‘Republikanismus des Dissenses’, in their (Eds.): ‘Die Aktualität des Republikanismus’, Baden-Baden 2016, p. 345-369, here p. 351

41. Christian Dries: ‘Die Welt als Vernichtungslager. Eine kritische Theorie der Moderne im Anschluss an Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt und Hans Jonas’, Bielefeld 2012, p. 244f. ‘Briefly (and at the same time expanded through one small qualification): “According to Arendt, Politics is not a means towards freedom, rather freedom is ‘the basic reason why people live together in a politically organised way’. Only at times of crisis, war and revolution does freedom become the immediate aim of political action.” Ibid. p. 245, fn. 530

42. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vita activa’, p. 252

43. Rahel Jaeggi: ‘Wie weiter mit Hannah Arendt?’, Hamburg 2008, p. 11

And upon what is this unfolding, this engendering of power based? “The single, purely material, essential pre-condition for the engendering of power is the human group itself. Only in a group, where the association is close enough to keep the possibility of mutual interaction constantly open, can power arise.”⁴⁴ Within a “group, where the association is close enough”, power, according to Arendt, “is not [possessed] by anyone; it arises between people, when they interact, and it dissipates as soon as they drift apart.”⁴⁵ In other words:

Power corresponds not only to the human ability to engage in action, but also to join together with others and to act in accord with them. No single individual can ever have power; it is the property of a group, and only persists as long as the group remains together.⁴⁶

And how does Arendt explain the human ability “to join together with others and to act in accord with them”? “From the fact that” – as summed up by Jürgen Habermas – “the subjects engaged in action [...] can make a new start”; on this basis “not only the unforeseen can occur [in history] but also the completely new.”⁴⁷ In Arendt’s own words:

Insofar as the ability to act and speak – and speech is, after all, another form of action – makes political beings of us, and since action, from time immemorial, means bringing something into play that was previously not there, birth, human natality, as the counterpart of mortality, is the ontological *conditio sine qua non* of all politics.⁴⁸

Elsewhere Arendt consolidates this basic motif of her political, indeed, of her philosophical thinking as follows:

What turns people into political beings is their ability to act; this enables them to join together with others, make common cause with them, set themselves goals and devote themselves to enterprises they would never have thought of if they did not possess a particular talent: namely, for initiative. Philosophically speaking, taking action is the human individual’s answer to being born as one of the fundamental conditions of his existence: since through birth we all appear in the world as new arrivals and new beginnings, we are all capable of initiative. Without the fact of birth we would never know what the new is; all action would be either mere behaviour or self-preservation.⁴⁹

And having founded power and politics upon natality and plurality, how does this square with the existence of political institutions? What is their existence based upon? That which, according to Arendt, “holds a political body together, is its particular power potential, and what brings about the downfall of political communities is the loss of power and ultimately impotence.”⁵⁰ Arendt’s meaning becomes clearer when she says that “[a]ll political institutions [...] [are] manifestations and materialisations of power; they become rigid and disintegrate once the living power of the people is no longer behind them and supporting them”.⁵¹ It is this “living power of the people”, the “support of the people” that Arendt perceives as guaranteeing the vitality of political institutions: “That which grants power to the institutions and laws of a country is the support of the people, which is simply the continuation of the consensus which originally called the institutions and laws into being.”⁵² Wolfgang Heuer sums up Arendt’s view of power in relation to politics as follows:

44. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vita activa’, p. 253

45. Ibid., p. 252

46. Hannah Arendt: ‘Macht und Gewalt’, p. 45

47. Jürgen Habermas: ‘Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie. Vol. 2: Vernünftige Freiheit. Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen’, Berlin 2019, p. 516f.

48. Hannah Arendt: ‘Die Freiheit, frei zu sein’, p. 37

49. Hannah Arendt: ‘Macht und Gewalt’, p. 81

50. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vita activa’, p. 252

51. Hannah Arendt: ‘Macht und Gewalt’, p. 42

52. Ibid. Arendt makes no secret of her opinion “[t]hat the system of representative government has actually transformed itself into a kind of oligarchy”, to which she states her preference for a soviet republic: “If the ultimate aim of the revolution is the *constitutio libertatis*, the establishing of freedom, in other words, the constituting of a public domain in which it can come into manifestation, then these elementary republics or soviets, where everyone can make use of their freedom, and is thus free in a positive sense, are in fact the great ultimate goal of any republic.” Hannah Arendt: ‘Über die Revolution’, Munich 2014, p. 347/p. 326. To what extent the *constitutio libertatis*, in Arendt’s sense of the term, speaks in favour of an unconditional basic income has been investigated by Linda Sauer: ‘Das bedingungslose Grundeinkommen im Lichte der politischen Philosophie Hannah Arendts. Eine etwas andere Kritik der politischen Ökonomie’, in Rigmor Osterkamp (Ed.): ‘Auf dem Prüfstand: ein bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen für Deutschland?’, Baden-Baden 2015, p. 143-156

Contrary to the Western tradition Arendt defines politics not as rule or governance, but as action. Since Plato, according to her critique, systems of government have been seen as forms of dominion – the rule of one over all, the few over the many or all over all. Defining politics as action negates all these distinctions and places in question all their associated hierarchies or exclusions, as well as the equivalence of power and violence they imply. It is not that individuals or groups have dominion, rather through taking action people enter into relationship with each other.⁵³

To this opinion that power is founded not upon a relationship between the rulers and the ruled, but ultimately upon an alliance of citizens who are as free as they are equal, Arendt lends further historical underpinnings:

When the Athenian polis described itself as an “isonomy”, an organisation of equals within the law, or when the Romans called their *res publica* – the public entity – a *civitas*, a citizens alliance, they had in mind a [...] concept of power and law, the nature of which did not rest upon the relationship between those who command and those who obey, and which did not equate power with dominion or law with command.⁵⁴

Elsewhere Arendt notes that precisely what she considers to be particularly important has scarcely ever existed:

Perhaps nothing has appeared so seldom and so fleetingly in our history as genuine trust in power; nothing has been more persistently prevalent than the Platonic-Christian mistrust of the attractive lustre of power, which is intrinsic to it, because it grants one recognition, but also induces vaingloriousness. Nothing has come to be accepted more widely in modern times than the conviction that “power corrupts”.⁵⁵

“However, power only has a corrupting effect,” according to Arendt, “on those areas where it is important that something be produced that can only be done in isolation, namely, in the so-called realm of cultural and intellectual life, not in the actual political realm.”⁵⁶

Philosophies of Freedom

Hannah Arendt’s concept of power implies, as already suggested, a philosophy of freedom based upon human plurality, which – however fundamentally the “plural We” might differ from the “dual I-and-I” – corresponds to one based upon human individuality. On this point Jörg Ewertowski notes:

The most basic condition for being human is individualisation. Hannah Arendt calls this the condition of plurality, by which she means the fact that human beings differ much more from one another than do animals of the same species. [...] Animals relate to each other in recurring patterns. [...] Only among humans is the sphere of action entirely open. [...] A true understanding of human action [...] demands an idea of freedom which the Greek philosophers were not yet capable of grasping. It is the idea of not simply being free from any kind of subservience, but of being able to begin something entirely new out of an inner decision.⁵⁷

Thus, in an initial-philosophical sense, plurality and individuality sound the same:

Because every human being, on account of being born, is a beginning, the arrival in the world of something new, human beings are capable of taking initiative, of being beginners and setting the new in motion. [...] With the creation of the human being came the principle of initiative. At the creation of the world it was still, as it were, in the hand of God, and thus remained outside the world; but with the creation of the human being it appeared in the world, and will remain immanent within it as long as human beings exist; which, of course,

53. Wolfgang Heuer; ‘Politik und Verantwortung’, in: ‘Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte’ 39/2006, p. 8-15, here p. 8

54. Hannah Arendt: ‘Macht und Gewalt’, p. 41

55. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vita activa’, p. 259

56. Ibid. p. 258. Although this is not the place to go into it in detail, it is at least worth mentioning that Hannah Arendt’s concept of power has been subjected to a wide variety of criticisms. Chief among the critics is Jürgen Habermas, who states: “[A] state that is not burdened with the administrative business of society; a politics that is cleansed of all concern for social issues; an institutionalisation of public freedom that is independent of the organisation of welfare; a radically democratic schooling of the will that stops short of social repression – that is no conceivable way to run any kind of modern society.” – Jürgen Habermas: ‘Hannah Arendts Begriff der Macht’, p. 240

57. Jörg Ewertowski: ‘Das tätige und das kontemplative Leben. Hannah Arendts Idee vom Handeln’, in: ‘Die Christengemeinschaft’ 2/2016, p. 26-29, here p. 27f.

ultimately means nothing other than that the creation of the human being as a someone coincides with the creation of freedom.⁵⁸

Biographically speaking, remarks Daniel Morat, “Arendt’s philosophy of freedom [is] her own counterblast to the worldview of totalitarianism – the antithesis of freedom – which she described in her 1951 book [‘The Origins of Totalitarianism’].⁵⁹ Indeed, Arendt saw herself confronted not only by the initial creation, but chiefly by the historically conditioned abolition of freedom and the “banality of evil”⁶⁰ – a malignancy in the face of which she asked herself:

Could it perhaps be that the nature of thinking itself – the habit of examining everything that happens or that attracts attention regardless of the consequences or the particular nature of the content – is among the conditions that prevent human beings from doing evil, or even predispose them against it?⁶¹

Arendt says yes to this question insofar as it relates to dialogical, indeed, creative thinking as a “pre-philosophical condition of philosophy itself”:

When the activity of thinking itself is the source of the moral precept, when it conditions the silent inner dialogue between me and myself, no matter what it is concerned with, then it is [...] the pre-philosophical condition of philosophy itself, and thus a condition which philosophical thinking has in common with all other unspecialised modes of thought. [...] To engage in evil acts is to depreciate this ability; the surest way for a criminal to escape ever being found out and to avoid punishment is to forget what he has done, and never think about it.⁶²

This denial of thinking, the “most active”⁶³ of all activities, the essence of all character formation, is precisely what Arendt observes in the Nazi war-criminals:

The most troubling thing about the Nazi war-criminals was that they voluntarily gave up all personal character traits, as if there was no longer anyone there to be either punished or pardoned. [...] The greatest acts of evil are those that were committed by No One, in other words, by human beings who have abjured their personhood.⁶⁴

By the same token, according to Arendt,

a person’s general humanity diminishes to the extent that he abandons thinking, puts his trust in ready-made answers, received truths, whether familiar or unfamiliar, and lays them out, as if they were so many coins with which to pay off all the debts of experience.⁶⁵

And out of this for her follows the contrary conclusion:

When thinking, the two-in-one of the silent inner dialogue, actualises within our identity the contrary position to this, as it is given in our consciousness [...], then judgment, itself the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, must be seen as that which actualises thinking and makes it manifest in the world of appearances.⁶⁶

58. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vita activa’ p. 215f. Cf. Ruth Ewertowski: ‘Der Leib Gottes. Menschwerdung von oben und von unten’, Stuttgart, p. 61-67; Philip Kovce: ‘Götterdämmerung. Rudolf Steiners Initialphilosophie’, Berlin 2014, particularly p. 93f.

59. Daniel Morat: ‘Mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger denken. Intellektuelles Engagement und praktische Philosophie nach 1945’, in Habbo Knoch (Ed): ‘Bürgersinn mit Weltgefühl. Politische Moral und solidarischer Protest in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren’, Göttingen 2007, p. 57-73, here p. 67. Cf. Hannah Arendt: ‘Ich will verstehen. Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk’, Munich 2005.

60. Cf. Hannah Arendt: ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen’, Munich 2011; Philip Kovce: ‘Outsourcing moralischer Verantwortung: Die Banalität des Bösen ist allgegenwärtig’, in: Deutschlandfunk Kultur: Politisches Feuilleton’ vom 25. August 2020.

61. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vom Leben des Geistes’, p. 15. Elsewhere she says something rather similar: “Could the activity of thinking as such – the habit of investigating and keeping in mind whatever happens to claim our attention, no matter what the content and regardless of the possible outcomes – could this activity be so constituted that it ‘conditions’ us against wrongdoing?” Hannah Arendt: ‘Über den Zusammenhang von Denken und Moral’, in: ‘Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft’, p. 128-156, p. 129.

62. Hannah Arendt: ‘Über das Böse. Eine Vorlesung zu Fragen der Ethik’, Munich 2008, p. 75

63. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vita activa’, p. 414

64. Hannah Arendt: ‘Über das Böse’, p. 101. Cf. Philip Kovce: ‘Ich-Bildung. Der Mensch als Schöpfer seiner selbst. Motive einer ungeschriebenen Philosophie Gerhard Kienles’, Arlesheim 2017, particularly p. 39.

65. Hannah Arendt: ‘Menschen in finsternen Zeiten’, Munich 2012, p. 20

66. Hannah Arendt: ‘Über den Zusammenhang von Denken und Moral’, p. 155. Cf. Hannah Arendt: ‘Das Urteilen’, Munich 2012

Accordingly, for Hannah Arendt “the observation of thinking [is] a path to the overcoming of evil”⁶⁷ – or, as Bodo von Plato expresses it:

Hannah Arendt shows how the ability to tell the difference between “good and evil” arises from the development of the individual human will and its attendant capabilities. [...] This is not a plea for a state of anarchy, in which there would be no more generally valid moral precepts. Rather she places her trust in a process of human development that enables the individual to create his own moral values in such a way that they form a fitting basis (that is, grounded in freedom) for his own and the lives of those around him. It is not hard to perceive here the kinship of her thinking to Rudolf Steiner’s concept of ethical individualism.⁶⁸

“To live in the love of action and in tolerant understanding of the intentions of others” – this “fundamental maxim of free human beings”⁶⁹ has its roots in Rudolf Steiner’s ‘Philosophy of Freedom’ – on the one hand, in pure thinking, on the other, in moral intuition. In this way it creates the foundation of a pluralistic, liberal, ethical individualism, or perhaps an individualistic, liberal, ethical pluralism. This seems akin to Arendt’s ideas, not least because, according to her – as to Steiner – “the concept of free will [...] is not just a necessary postulate of every system of ethics and rights, but also just such an immediate fact of consciousness’ as Kant’s ‘ich-denke’ or Descartes’ *cogito*”.⁷⁰ – In 2006, on the occasion of the centenary of Hannah Arendt’s birth, Konstantin J. Sakkas wrote:

This is the message Hannah Arendt has for us: that we are at a historical turning point – the change from a condition of inaction to one of concerted, fully justified action in the world. [...] That may sound simplistic, conservative and old-fashioned; but whoever seriously embarks upon a process of self-examination, of laying bare the true contours of their own will, that person will attain to the finest and highest form of freedom: that of genuine, ethical individualism. [...] As a matter of practical fact we have never been further from such ethical individualism than we are today; in terms of consciousness, however, we have never been closer, for precisely because we can no longer believe in anything external to ourselves – whether it be country, or society, or God – we have the chance to do something that no terror or boredom can rob us of, namely, to each take hold of his or her true self and become truly happy by doing so.⁷¹

In 2025 the 100th anniversary of Rudolf Steiner’s death, as well as the 50th anniversary of Hannah Arendt’s will be commemorated. It is highly improbable that Arendt had any acquaintance with Steiner’s works, let alone studied them.⁷² What connects their two radical philosophies of freedom is that both seem to have created them independently of one another. Connection through creation – that is entirely possible, if not indeed the very reality of freedom; after all, as Arendt herself said: “We are able to begin things, because we ourselves are beginnings, and therefore beginners.”⁷³

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67. Martin Basfeld: ‘Elisabeth Vreede und die Spiritualisierung der Wissenschaft’, in: Die Drei 2/2019, p. 63-74, here p. 74

68. Bodo von Plato: ‘Ethik der menschlichen Beziehungen’, in: ‘Das Goetheanum’ 6-7. Cf. Kurt E. Becker: ‘Anthroposophie – Revolution von innen. Leitlinien im Denken Rudolf Steiners’, Frankfurt a. M. 1984, p. 47-52

69. Rudolf Steiner: ‘Die Philosophie der Freiheit’ (GA 4), Dornach 1995, p. 166. Cf. Philip Kovce (Ed.): ‘Stichwort Freiheit. Spirituelle Perspektiven’, Basel 2014

70. Hannah Arendt: ‘Vom Leben des Geistes’, p. 247

71. Konstantin J. Sakkas: ‘Hannah Arendt zum 100. Geburtstag’, in Die Drei 12/2006, p. 21-26, here p. 25f.

72. There is nonetheless the well-attested fact that for example Karl Jaspers had a critical interest in Steiner’s works, and he was Arendt’s teacher, life-long friend and doctorate supervisor. Jaspers supervised the doctorates of both Hans Erhard Lauer and Herbert Witzmann. Cf. Bodo von Plato (Ed.): ‘Anthroposophie im 20. Jahrhundert. Ein Kulturimpuls in biographischen Porträts’, Dornach 2003, p. 431 and 932

73. Hannah Arendt: ‘Die Freiheit, frei zu sein’, p. 37