NIHILISM AND THE RESURRECTION OF POLITICAL SPACE: HANNAH ARENDT’S UTOPIA?

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“‘Wherever you go, you will be a polis’”


The first half of the twentieth century, in Hannah Arendt’s view, suffered from the coming to fruition of nihilism, as traditions that had been disrupted by the growth of the sciences and the adherence to conventional morality came to be shallow and easily abandoned: “in passing from hand to hand,” Arendt (2006a, p. 201) writes, cultural values “were worn down like old coins. They lost the faculty which is originally peculiar to all cultural things, the faculty of arresting our attention and moving us.” So, she concludes, with a startling analogy, morality had been reduced to a set of seemingly arbitrary customs, “which could be exchanged for another set with no more trouble than it would take to exchange the table manners of a whole people” (Arendt, 2003, p. 43).

Arendt draws upon diverse traditions precisely to deal with the disruption of traditions—that is, she approaches them in order to find practices which can stabilize human life, when the stability of received traditions has been disturbed. Instead of the moral conventions transmitted by religious and philosophical traditions, she wants to retrieve elements from these traditions which can mitigate the risks of cruelty inherent in an uncritical submission to political authority once conventions have become empty. Thus, the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action, she says, can be mitigated by promise and forgiveness—the former is a crucial part of classical political practices, but formulated most strongly as a promise of hope in Christianity, whereas the “role of forgiveness in human affairs” was, she claims, discovered by “Jesus of Nazareth” (Arendt, 1998, p. 238). Furthermore, she locates the discovery of conscience in the inner dialogues of Socrates, but as a “side effect. And it remains a marginal affair for society at large except in emergencies” (Arendt, 2003, p. 188). It is in exceptional situations, where conventional morality no longer seems to be able to guide
us, or has collapsed, that we most need these stabilizing elements, inherent in, but often obscured by, traditions.

Arendt’s drawing upon Christianity as well as classical Greek and Roman elements in addressing the problems of the contemporary world, however, raises the question whether she was indeed in any sense a “Jewish thinker” and what, if anything, this entails for her political thought and its contemporary relevance. In the following, I will argue that Arendt’s thought can be characterized as a hybrid drawing upon diverse elements—Jewish, German, Christian, Classical—an observation that can be extended to an understanding of her advocacy of political spaces, which can be seen, in a certain sense, as both utopian and messianic. Thereafter, Arendt’s writings on revolution will be used to further illuminate her thought on political space, and on the many anti-political forces preventing political spaces from arising. Finally, I will advance a critique of certain blind spots in her view of the political, and suggest some paths forward.

1. Arendt’s Thought: Tragedy and Hope

To claim Judaism as the exclusive, or even predominant, influence on Arendt’s thought would certainly be absurd—but it would be equally absurd to deny that her Judaism had any influence on her thought. She was, undoubtedly, a Jewish thinker, absorbed by the horrors that confronted the Jewish populations of Europe in the twentieth century. But she could also be called a German thinker engaging with issues pervading the wider German cultural milieus within which she was born, raised, and educated, as well as an American thinker—commenting on the origins and fate of the American republic—a Greek and a Roman thinker, engaging with classical sources with a sense of urgency in the sincere belief in their continued and supremely contemporary relevance. She was even, albeit to a limited extent, a Christian thinker, if only in the sense that she stressed the role of hope and rebirth in Christianity and referred explicitly, as we have seen, to the Christ figure.

In her review of *The Jewish Writings*, a collection of Arendt’s essays and articles from the 1930s to the 1960s, Judith Butler recalls the clash between Arendt and Gershom Scholem. The latter, in the wake of Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, accused her of a certain lack of love; namely of *Ahabath Israel*, “Love of the Jewish people” (cf. Butler, 2007). To which Arendt (2007, pp. 466–467) responds: “I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort.” Arendt does not deny her Jewishness, but she views this fact not in the light of the love of a people, but rather with “a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been given and not made; for what is *physēi* and not *nomō*” (ibid., p. 466). What is so significant here, and what is easily overlooked because we take it for granted—indeed, as a given—is that in expressing her basic relation to being