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Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy : On the Role of World Spectator

Kiyoko Shimizu

【I】

“Can there ever be the 21st century?”, asked Jean-Paul Sartre. Together with Simone de Beauvoir, he continued to warn against the threat of nuclear war and to remind the intellectual community of the West of its obligation to avert this disaster to humanity. But Sartre and Beauvoir had died by the middle of the eighties, while Gorbachev rose to power and led the Soviet Union on a course of history which marked the end of the Cold War. In 1989, at the bicentennial anniversary of the French Revolution, we saw the Berlin Wall come down, and the rigid political system of the Eastern Block nations convulse. In 1991, the Soviet Union ended its 70 year old history.

At first, we could have expected the threat of nuclear war to disappear. But the outbreak of the Gulf War darkened our hopes that the post-Cold War period would be free of any large-scale hostilities. The tensions between the Soviet Union and the Western world may have eased, but the unresolved problems with the Arab nations soon dampened the sense of security which the West had enjoyed for a brief spell. In what was formerly the Soviet Union, new and old claims for nationalism became rampant ; especially in the old Yugoslavia, the cruel reports of ethnic

cleansing overshadowed our daily news. Concentration camps seem no longer to belong to the forgotten past. The specter of Neo-nazism is looming in the newly united Germany, and the rising expectations of economic growth, now suddenly put on hold, begin to shake the political foundations of many industrialized nations. At the same time the poverty-stricken Third World is beginning to sense the injustice that exists in the current world order. The next century would certainly become a reality contrary to the fear of Sartre and Beauvoir, but it will inherit all the ugly problems which had been overshadowed and forcibly suppressed by the struggle between the Super Powers. Today's situation, globally speaking, is no less turbulent, no less disheartening than half a century ago, when Hannah Arendt, at the epicenter of Europe's turmoil, embarked on a philosophical career. She emerged, after thirty years of intense personal experience and thinking, as a spokesperson for those who are displaced, homeless, disadvantaged, persecuted, and ethnically and sexually discriminated. With a voice of inner fortitude and clarity of vision, she compels us today to retrace the process of the maturation of what is called uniquely the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt.

【II】

At the risk of repeating what people may already know about Arendt's personal history, I will briefly sketch the stages of her development. Hannah Arendt was born in the suburb of Hannover in northern Germany in 1906. Her parents were members of the Social Democratic Party which was illegal at that time. They were "well-integrated" German Jews with moderate political

convictions. Hannah lost her father at the age of 7, and her mother re-married when she was 14.

In 1924, at the age of 18, Hannah Arendt entered the Department of Philosophy of the University of Marburg, and there she met the young Heidegger, who, at the age of 35, still two years before the publication of *Being and Time*, was already recognized among German universities as an exceptional teacher. Arendt contributed an article to Heidegger's 80th birthday in 1969, and two years later, in 1971, its English translation appeared in the *New York Review of Books* (October 21). Let me quote a few lines from this article.

Heidegger's 'fame' predates by about eight years the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927; indeed it is open to question whether the unusual success of this book would have been possible if it had not been preceded by the teacher's reputation among the students, in whose opinion, at any rate, the book's success merely confirmed what they had known for many years.—There was something strange about this early fame, stranger perhaps than the fame of Kafka in the early twenties or of Braque and Picasso in the preceding decade, who were also unknown to what is commonly understood as the public and nevertheless exerted an extraordinary influence.

Arendt then mentions Jaspers as a philosopher who differed from those who belonged to traditional "circles". "What these few had in common was—to put it in Heidegger's words—that they could distinguish 'between an object of scholarship' and 'a matter of thought'.⁽¹⁾" (Cf. W. Biemel, M. Heidegger.

An Illustrated Study, Harvest 1976, 1-5)

This last quote in which “matter of thought” was contrasted with “object of scholarship”, was to become the key phrase for Arendt’s political philosophy that outlived the mutual fascination between the German philosopher and his Jewish disciple.

In 1926, when the environment of her study in Marburg became less and less agreeable, Arendt went to Karl Jaspers in Heidelberg. Under Jaspers’ supervision, she wrote her doctoral dissertation, “The Concept of Love in Augustine”. At this time, she was merely twenty three years old. Derwent May, in his study of Hannah Arendt published in 1986, describes the thrust of this dissertation in the following words :

It is an austere, systematic study, relating Augustine’s different concepts of love to the human experience of the time. The greatest value of this work to her was probably the deeper acquaintance it gave her with early Christian thought about virtue and political life, which helped her more sharply to define her own ideas in due course in *The Human Condition*.⁽²⁾

Though Jaspers recommended to Arendt to apply for a teaching career in Germany, she chose to remain an independent thinker, and soon had to leave Germany under the mounting pressure of anti-Semitism. In 1933, she left for France. For a time, she helped the children of exiled Jews to find homes in Palestine, but she became critical of the Zionist movement because she had a different notion about the way the “Jewish State” should be structured, and withdrew from this movement completely. And in 1941, she sought with her mother and Heinrich Brücher refuge in the United States. She married Heinrich Brücher in 1940. He

became her lifelong partner in conversation, the fruition of which can be seen in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). This book, 18 years after she left Germany, threw her, at the age of 45, suddenly into the limelight of the academic community. According to H. Stuart Hughes, the author of the three volume treatment of the history of ideas of the 20th century, *The Sea Change* (1930–1965), Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* is "the most learned and incisive" work addressing the pressing ideological situation of the time.

Before I introduce some critical observations about this book, I should mention that my own encounter with Arendt's work was not entirely without the elements of shared feeling for the crisis of our modern times. Growing up as a teenager in post-war Japan, I had my own set of problems, but in order to predispose me to pursue the study of philosophy, the society around me must have had more than its ordinary share of incentive to put me in a philosophically reflective mood. I recall being taken to church by my mother who was a Christian. I was christened at the age of 18. It was at this time that I started to question the meaning of religion, and this penchant I carried into the selection of my major at college, and I thus enrolled in the department of philosophy of Osaka University. My freshman year in college was also the year when Japanese universities were swept by the campaign against the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. Though skepticism drove me to philosophical reflection, there was now the question of meaningful action was inseparably interwoven with it.

Thus by the time I had in my hand *Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy* (edited with an Interpretative Essay by Ronald Beiner),

I knew that I had been waiting eagerly for this kind of book for some time. Much in the same vein as Margaret Canovan, who is the author of *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (London, 1974), who stated that she understood Arendt's work from within with an inner sympathy, I would confirm that an important book by an author of the same sex had the same direct appeal to me, though I was soon to learn that whatever narrow, self-centered views, including feminist principles, were something to be transcended in order to approach the level of Arendt's political thinking. Nor can I deny that Arendt's original interpretation and appropriation of Kant greatly fascinated me, because as a student of philosophy, I wrote my first paper on Kant's humanism. But after all, it was the total blend of Hannah Arendt's philosophy, her grasp of the human condition in the most penetrating way imaginable, and the unique and original individuality of her thinking that gave me a sense of direction for my own life and work.

I shall now return to her major work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Even though Stuart Hughes' overall assessment of this book was positive, he noted in his *Sea Change* that Arendt treated Nazism and Stalinism in the same dimension, and he criticized the fact that she overlooked the difference between the national-socialist form of totalitarianism and its Soviet counterpart. According to Hughes, such a difference derives its roots from the divergent economic systems and the power structures that are inherent in them. Arendt could not possibly have knowledge of economic theories, considering the nature of her scholarly training; thus, concluded Hughes, her work fell rapidly behind the time. Today, twenty years later, in light of what has transpired

in the former Soviet Union, we are entitled to ask whether it was not Hughes' more narrowly timebound analysis that was surpassed by the progress of events. I am certain that our age of post-modernism has not outlived the relevance of the political philosophy of Arendt. For what makes her view-point enduringly unique is derived from her original thought style.

She is careful to distinguish 'thought' from 'cognition'—the search for specific knowledge, and from 'logic'—the following of rational trains of thought to their logical conclusion. Now what Arendt means by thought, and what her works present as the result thereof, is a quite different activity. It can be learned and practised, but it cannot be taught by inculcating a method, nor can rules be prescribed for it. It consists in the endless effort of human beings to make sense of what they experience, to get their minds round the things that confront them, the activities they engage in, and above all, the events that happen among them.⁽³⁾

Her work is political thought, in the sense of representing the free play of political thought of an individual mind round politics, making sense of political events and placing them within an unfolding understanding of all that comes within that mind's range. Further, "thinking is the faculty that creates cosmos out of chaos, that gives us, instead of bits of unrelated data or self-enclosed chains of reasoning, a mental world to move in that is adequated to reality. Such thinking is necessarily an individual activity."⁽³⁾ In this way, her thought is very unique and has a disconcerting implication for an age where uniformity is

regarded as a hallmark of truth, where no two thinking people will ever think quite alike. It is also easy to see that Arendt owes this "existentiell" notion of thought to Heidegger and Jaspers. But, for her part, she much more openly acknowledged her indebtedness to the political philosophy of Kant, and with a good reason. She did not turn to Kant in the ordinary sense, looking for a guidance in his writings on ethics, political philosophy and philosophy of history. Characteristically, it was the *Critique of Judgement* and not the *Critique of Practical Reason* that Arendt interprets as the source from which insight can be gained in coming to terms with political reality.

For the *Critique of Practical Reason* is dominated by the categorical imperative that compels you to act always in such a manner that the principle of your action can become a general law. Hannah Arendt points out that this law derives its force from the notion of consistency, of agreeing with oneself, that is essential to rational thought. But the kind of thinking that Kant describes in the *Critique of Judgement* consists, he says, of common sense (*sensus communis*) i. e. "enlarged mind" which is able to "think in the place of everybody else" (an der Stelle jedes Anderen denken)⁽⁵⁾.—In fact judgement as described by Kant strikes Arendt as being a peculiarly political capacity, because it involves thinking (actually or in imagination) in the presence of others, considering their viewpoints as well as one's own and seeking their acceptance of one's judgement. In being so intrinsically related to others, to our sharing of the world, and to the common sense that belongs to that common world, it is quite different from philosophical thinking, which Hannah Arendt sees as the essentially singleminded pursuit of truth, within one mind

and outside and beyond the world of common sense. But Arendt had not thought about all this when she wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In this book, she still tried to be rational in her pursuit of the reasons why the nightmares of this century had to happen. The revolution in her thinking occurred after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961.

[III]

R. Beiner writes in his interpretive essay of H. Arendt's political philosophy: "According to Hannah Arendt, 'thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings'. If this is so, what particular experience gave rise to her theory of judging?"⁽⁶⁾ Everyone will point to her study on the rise of totalitarianism as one of such experiences. For, as Beiner explains, it alerted Arendt to the complexities of human judgement and to the threat posed to it by developments in modern society. But there is good reason for supposing that another, more specific, though obviously related 'incident of living experience' precipitated her efforts to theorize about the nature of judgement, namely, her presence at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Her report of the trial, which appeared in 1963, first in the *New Yorker* and then in book form, generated a huge storm of controversy. Arendt herself informs us that her reflections on the status of truth and on the function of thought were motivated by her involvement in the Eichmann controversy. There is thus little reason to doubt that what was preoccupying her when she began to think seriously about judgement was the unavoidable need to render judgement in the case of Adolf Eichmann, together

with the fact that Eichmann himself clearly abstained from responsible judgement—an evil generated by his thought-defying banality. According to Beiner, the Eichmann affair brought Arendt to a full awareness of judgement's function of assimilating in a humanly intelligible way whatever most strenuously resists such assimilation. Judgement brings its object of judgement within the reach of human meaningfulness. This is brought to light most strikingly in the exchange between Arendt and Gershom Scholem over the Eichmann question. Scholem wrote in his letter to Arendt: "There were among (the elders of the Jews) many people in no way different from ourselves, who were compelled to make terrible decisions in circumstances that we cannot even begin to reproduce or reconstruct. I do not know whether they were right or wrong. *Nor do I presume to judge* 'I was not there'. Arendt replied: '(The behavior of Jewish functionaries) constitutes our part of the so-called 'unmastered past', and although you may be right that it is too early for a balanced judgement (though I doubt this), I do believe that *we shall only come to terms with this past if we begin to judge* and to be frank about it."⁽⁷⁾ Thus judgement serves to help us make sense of, and to render humanly intelligible, events that otherwise could not be made so. The faculty of judgement is in the service that Arendt ascribes to the telling of excellent deeds in a story and conferring intelligibility is the meaning of politics.

In this place, Beiner compares Arendt's 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror*, for both are similar moral dimensions.

These two books are addressed to the two most extreme

(and most distressing) political experiences of our century, Nazism and Stalinism, respectively. What the two works share is that in both cases the effort to understand is at the center of their respective inquiries. When understanding is placed in the service of judgement, it requires the free exercise of imagination—in particular, the ability to imagine how things look from a position that we do not in fact occupy. Judgement may require us to make the effort to understand those whose point of view we not only do not share, but may even find highly distasteful. Disagreement does not release us from the responsibility to understand what we reject; if anything, it rather heightens this responsibility.⁽⁸⁾

Bainer continues to write:

“...for Merleau-Ponty, too, judgement assumes the tragic task of understanding and forgiving, these composing the tragic dimensions of judgement.” According to Merleau-Ponty, “true liberty takes others as they are, tries to understand even those doctrines which are its negation, and *never allows itself to judge before understanding*.” “We must fulfill our freedom of thought in the freedom of understanding⁽⁹⁾”. Arendt’s efforts to come to terms with the experience of the Holocaust convey the same message. To judge a genuinely human situation is to partake of the tragedy that is potential in circumstances where human responsibility is exercised and borne to its limit. This helps to explain why Arendt associates the faculty of judging with the sense of human dignity.

The case of Eichman is relevant for Hannah Arendt’s theme of judgement in a twofold sense. In the first sense, Eichman

himself is seen as the judging subject, who, however, miserably fails in this capacity. There is a sheer abismal inability of this man to think and judge,—to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly,—in the critical political situation in which he was involved. The lesson here is that the inability to think, not the ability to reason logically or think technically, but to discern what is the real issue in a total human context, has fatal implications for the faculty of judging.

In the second sense, Arendt herself and her fellow American Jews are called upon to pass judgement. This is a “retrospective” judgement, and, as such, it poses a challenge to the very status of judgement. For the issue is whether one ought perhaps, out of concern or fear of committing a betrayal, to suspend judgement altogether. But Arendt is firm on this and insists on judging unconditionally. The lesson in this is that responsibility for making judgements cannot be shirked even when commitments and allegiances of a familial or national kind would seem to intrude upon the judgement itself. The activity of judging cannot be inhibited by supposedly prior relations of love or loyalty. Judgement must be free, and the condition of its autonomy is the ability to think. When freedom is portrayed thus as predicate to the power of *i m a g i n a t i o n*, it is easy to see why Arendt was drawn more to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* than to his *Critique of Practical Reason* in her effort to round off her theory of political judgement. For imagination is here linked most closely with that *e n l a r g e d - m i n d* which is political thinking par excellence, “because it enables us to put ourselves in the minds of other men.” As a consequence, politics and culture are seen by Arendt as not essentially separate spheres of human activity.

Both are concerned how the world looks, and how it appears to those who share it, and both attend to the quality of the worldly dwelling that envelops us and in which we pass our moral existence.

Arendt introduces her discussion of judgement in connection with 'the spectator' who apprehends cultural and political appearances. Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is now appealed to, she tells us, because, in the first part, the '*Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*', it offers 'an analytic of the beautiful primarily from the view-point of the judging spectator'. This concern with the judging spectator is simply the extension of Arendt's definition of politics in terms of virtuosity or performance. The deeds of the actor are as in need of the spectator's judgement as those of any other performer. Arendt begins her account of this idea of spectatorship by calling attention to the plurality presupposed in judgement as opposed to the solitary nature of thought.⁽¹⁰⁾

In regard to the Kantian notion of enlarged-mind to which we referred above, she now translates as "representative thinking" that is capable of thinking "from the standpoint of everyone else." This involves "potential agreement with others", but, unlike logical reasoning, it does not lay claim to universal validity. Rather, it appeals to judging persons who are "present", who are members of the public realm where the objects of judgement appear. Later Hannah Arendt modifies this sense of representative thinking. In her writings during the 1970's, she no longer links this thinking to political agents. Instead of being conceived in terms of the deliberation of political actors deciding on possible

courses of future actions, judging now becomes “reflection on the past”, and in common with thinking, “such reflections will inevitably arise in political emergencies”⁽¹¹⁾.

There is in Arendt’s later writings an attempt to buttress her theory with yet another basic concept with which she became familiar during her study under Heidegger. This is the redirection of Husserlian phenomenology by Heidegger to interpret cultural and historical events as “self-disclosing”.

Arendt now defines politics as “phenomenality”, as “self disclosure in a space of appearances.” Among the Greeks, “great deeds and great words were, in their greatness, as real as a stone or a house, there to be seen and heard by everybody present”. Poets and historiographers merely attempt to preserve the glory that is already visible to all. It is in that that art and politics are connected. They both are phenomena of the public world. “The phenomenality of politics is therefore analogous to the phenomenality of art”⁽¹²⁾.

Yet, in order to become aware of appearance, we first must be free to establish a certain distance between ourselves and the object, and the more important the sheer appearance of a thing is, the more distance is required for its proper appreciation. “This distance cannot arise unless we are in a position to forget ourselves, the cares and interests and urges of our lives, so that we will not seize just what we admire, but let it be as it is, in its appearance.”⁽¹³⁾

Contemporary hermeneutic philosophy might find in this statement of Arendt, which is basically similar to what Kant had made, a certain naivete, in that the self-forgetfulness, if complete, would not be able to motivate us to appreciate anything of the

past. Reflective awareness of the motivating interest as well as our own historicity has become admittedly an essential part of hermeneutic consciousness. But, when the last word is spoken, it is Hannah Arendt rather than hermeneutic philosophy that truly seems to provide the leverage of moral dimension to being a world spectator. “What is most important”, says Arendt,

“is that spectators participate in worldly events through sympathy, i. e. common sense”. In her lecture-notes on Kant, she writes : The importance of the occurrence is for him [Kant] exclusively in the eye of the beholder, in the opinion of onlookers who proclaim their attitude in public. Their reaction to the event proves the ‘moral character’ of mankind. Without this sympathetic participation, the ‘meaning’ of the occurrence would be altogether different or simply nonexistent. For it is the sympathy that inspires hope⁽¹⁴⁾—.

In conclusion, I will briefly touch on the impact the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt is having on Japan. As one might expect, it is in Women’s Liberation movements and among the followers of Feminist studies that the voice of Arendt reverberates most. But Arendt herself never consciously lent herself or her thought to the cause of feminism. It is more with a view to future development of feminist studies that we see the relevance of Arendt’s political philosophy to critical reappraisal of Japan’s current cultural climate.

Unlike postwar Germany, the cultural climate in Japan was such that what the Germans call “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”, or “to come to terms with the past”, was seldom self-induced, and Japan

reacted only when one heinous deed after another came to be revealed by victims in neighboring nations or through the publication of US. State Department archive materials. In such a climate, it is heartening to see a feminist scholar like Aiko Ohkoshi, who, under the banner of Feminist Group for Cultural Deconstruction, challenges the Japanese society to come out of the closet where the traditional macho mentality of the Japanese male seems to have left countless skeletons.⁽¹⁵⁾ The story of Japan's Imperial Army maintaining a large corps of so-called comfort-women has come to the fore only in the last several years. While these women were recruited exclusively from Japan's colonies, Ohkoshi sees the roots reaching far deeper in Japan's traditional sexual mores, and she has thrown down a gauntlet to Japan's male dominated society that has looked down on women as little more than commodities. But recrimination and revenge are not her last words. If Arendt spoke of "sympathetic participation", she also knew to draw from another source, and declared that what truly bonds nations together in brotherhood is "friendship", as she stated in her *Thought on Lessing*.⁽¹⁶⁾ This spirit is what also motivated Dorothy Moorefield, when she appealed to the state to abolish capital punishment, transcending the agony and sorrow over the loss of her own son who was brutally murdered.⁽¹⁷⁾ The point of view of a world-spectator means understanding the others and coming to terms with them. It is easier said than done, but then we have not even ventured to say anything for so long in the past. When we are truly able to make a free and responsible judgement, participation on the basis of this judgement, it is to be hoped, would become so much more compelling.

Notes

- (1) The New York Review of Books (October, 21, 1971)
- (2) *Hannah Arendt* (Derwent May, Penguin books 1986) p. 29
- (3) *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Margaret Canovan, London, 1974) p. 2
- (4) *Ibid.* p. 3
- (5) *Hannah Arendt—Lectures On Kant's Political Philosophy* (Ronald Beiner, Chicago 1982) p. 122
- (6) *Ibid.* p. 97
- (7) *Ibid.* p. 99ff.
- (8) *Ibid.* p. 100
- (9) *Ibid.*
- (10) *Ibid.*
- (11) *Ibid.* p. 109
- (12) *Ibid.* p. 110
- (13) *Ibid.*
- (14) *Ibid.* p. 46
- (15) Cf. Feminism is the point at issue (now)-Comfort-Women on Japan's Imperial Army and Japan's Sexual Climate: Aiko Ohkoshi, *Jyohkyoh* (Situation) June, 1992, Tokyo
- (16) Cf. On Humanity In Dark Times: Thoughts on Lessing in *Men In Dark Times* (Hannah Arendt, New York, 1955)
- (17) Cf. The Reports of Shikoku-Forum; Wishing for Ratifications of International Treaty of Abolishing Execution (Amnesty International, Japan, Shikoku Branch, 1992)

[The original draft of this paper goes back to a presentation entitled "Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy—From anti-Semitism to co-existence with differential" at the meeting of Osaka Kant Abend held in December 1991 in Kanazawa. The present English version was read

at the Departmental Colloquium of the Philosophy Department, State University of New York at Buffalo, in April 1993. Subsequently, I have written a fuller treatment of the subject under the title, "Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy(4)—From Thought about Lessing to 1990's Feminism-task", which appeared in vol. No. 27 of Otemon Gakuin University Faculty of Letters Review (May, 1993).] (26, Oct., 1993)

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