

A Philosophical Insight into Hannah Arendt's Concept of Human Plurality in Politics

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Abstract

This paper examines Arendt's search for an enabling ground for political action in society through her ideology of human plurality. Unrestricted political participation is crucial to the development of the political structures that are embedded in society. Arendt developed most of her ideas in response to the horrors of political evil and the rise of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Totalitarianism had its greatest evil in that it removed all the space in which individuals in a community or plurality with others were possible. It removes from us the ability for political action and in essence the ability to speak and act in concert with others. Plurality constitutes the kpin of political life. She calls it the essence of our existence. This is because the world is made up of a plurality of distinct individuals who are constantly engaging with the world. Arendt's ideology of politics is based on the inter-subjective nature of political interaction. It exists when free and unique individuals come together to interact through speech and action.

Keywords: Politics, Plurality, Power, Action, Public realm

Introduction

Politics is a unique activity and process that should help humans live a free and authentic life in society. Man according to Aristotle is a political being who has always sought and developed methods and systems of organizing himself according to what befits his true nature. Every rational and sane human desires a society where there is security, equality, the rule of law, freedom, peace, and stability, a society that recognizes the rights and liberties of its citizens, a society in which individuals can freely pursue their legitimate goals without causing pain or depriving the other. The absence of this will automatically lead society into a primitive state described by Hobbes. A state that is characterized by strife, chaos, and the quest for dominion. Over the years, the world has experienced a series of unrest and challenges in the quest for development, growth, unity, and

stability. As people participate in political activities, run for political office, take on leadership positions, and claim their rights to equal political representation and participation they have been faced with intense backlashes and deprivation based on their race, background, gender, and so on. This kind of abuse and discrimination is meant to scare and keep them away from politics and undermine their rights and liberties in society.

Following the above background statement, This research is aimed at espousing Hannah Arendt's idea of human plurality in politics. Politics she claimed is an end and unique process that should help humans live a free and authentic life. She sets plurality as a central theme to understanding man as a political being who is constantly engaging with others through speech and action. When she talks about politics she has in her mind the idea of a meeting place where free and equal citizens discuss what matters to them. It is the realm in which we exchange our ideas in the context of our plurality (equal yet unique and diverse in our opinions about the world). Her idea is a wonderful contrast with Hobbes. For Hobbes, freedom in politics is an extension of freedom to be able to move and push obstacles including other people out of our way. For Arendt, we only get to be free in relation to other free people.

Arendt's Concept of Human Plurality in Politics

Plurality she claims is required for action. It is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live (Arendt, 1958, p. 8). Plurality for her is the condition of our existence. It emphasizes that we always live with other people. This idea for Arendt is the foundation of politics. Throughout her life, she devoted herself to thinking and writing about politics, its mode of operation, its plurality, its dignity, and how it is rooted in our totality. Without the existence of others, who are different from us, without knowing, experiencing, and interacting with them, politics is not possible. Plurality as a term suggests the coexistence of many things such as opinions, beliefs, principles, and so on. At its core is the idea of respect for a diversity of these diverse beliefs and opinions.

In her work, *The Human Condition*, Arendt investigates the categories of the *vita activa*: labor, work, and action. The *vita activa* are the activities that make us human as opposed to mere animals. Margeret Canovan, in the introductory part of the book, writes that *The Human Condition* is

crammed with distinctions: between labor, work, and action; between power, violence, and strength; between the earth and the world; between property and wealth; and many more, often established through etymological explorations (1958, p. vii). She has thus defined the human condition through four fundamental ways of being in the world—contemplation (*theōria*), labour, work, and action—none of which capture the violence of war, revolution, law enforcement, punishment, colonialism, slavery, state and sub-state terrorism, vigilantism, domestic violence, or the defensive violence practiced by individuals and communities against these (Kautzer, 2009, p. 8). Labour for her is a biological process, it is an action of life that guarantees survival. Contrary to action, labour is considered the least human activity which is focused on the body and satisfaction of fundamental human needs. It is essentially linked to the pre-political and private sphere (Manograsso 2017, p. 32). It is an action directed by the desire for survival. Work on the other hand is the unnaturalness of human existence, it gives meaning to our existence. It is regarded as the productive activity which allows us to build an artificial world of objects and, despite having a higher range than labour, continues belonging to the pre-political sphere.

Action is the condition of human plurality. It is how people disclose themselves to others. What we do, say, talk/communicate about our individuality. Unlike labour and work which are directed towards material objects. Our actions are usually directed to people to generate meaningful relationships. To corroborate this, Cavanon writes that;

The book's most obvious organizing principle lies in its phenomenological analysis of three forms of activity that are fundamental to the human condition: labour, which corresponds to the biological life of man as an animal; work, which corresponds to the artificial world of objects that human beings build upon the earth; and action, which corresponds to our plurality as distinct individuals. Arendt argues that these distinctions (and the hierarchy of activities implicit in them) have been ignored within an intellectual tradition shaped by philosophical and religious priorities. (1992, p. ix)

Action is therefore the only activity that goes directly between human beings without the intermediary of things. It corresponds to the human condition of plurality, which is the condition of all human beings. Humans for her are conditioned to these, she rejects the idea of human nature and

argues that:

The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man. Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. The world in which the *vita activa* spends itself consists of things produced by human activities, but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly. (Arendt, 1958, p. 9)

In essence, we are action-oriented. It is through action that we can birth something new and unique. Everything we do has action to it, therefore, we need each other. This means that there is a plurality to the human condition, not human nature. For Arendt, it is the fact that we are equal yet interchangeably unique individuals who live together in the world. She writes about plurality that we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live (1958, p. 8). It is therefore essential for us to be human, in the *vita active* (active life/engagement with others) to be with others. The *vita contemplativa* on the other hand is the sphere where we withdraw temporarily from others to think, but we must return to be in the company of others because we need to act in concert with them. Without others, we cannot be recognized as individuals. The public realm for Arendt is where we come together to participate in activities for the common world. She relegates labour and work to the realm of the 'social' and favours the human condition of action as the political one that is both existential and aesthetic. And emphatically argues that nonviolent action is the *vita activa* and *kpim* of the political sphere. Action is also the only activity (amongst the three activities) that depends directly on public space and the presence of others. All human activities are therefore conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only an action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men. The activity of labour does not need the presence of others, though a being labouring in complete solitude would not be human but an animal (Arendt, 1958, p. 22). It is important to note that society is an enabling space for humans as social and political beings to exercise their freedom through speech and action.

The Relevance of Human Plurality in Politics

Who we are and what we come to actualization through our interaction with others. Politics includes the twofold aspects of equality and distinction. Equality talks about equal access to the political domain where one can speak to others and act with others. This means sameness. Since all persons are equal, they should be treated equally and given the same opportunities. This is what politics means for Arendt. That is constant discourse and action, seeing, hearing, and interacting with others, looking at the world from the perspectives of others even when we are alone. Our actions are always done with the other in mind. This idea can be likened to the idea of 'being with the other' in Heidegger's existentialism. To throw more light on this, Duranti argues that being with the other is more than shared or mutual understanding and is closer to the notion of the possibility of being in the place where the other is the source of objectivity (2010, p. 16). It is a way of experiencing the world in which one's experience is mediated by the consciousness of the experience of the other. Thus, the coming of the other makes it possible for it to conceive the world as something whose existence lies beyond its consciousness. To further corroborate this, Onyeakazi writes that man is essentially a being with others. He is a social being by nature and as such can't be found living in isolation. Thus, he is explicitly being-in-common, since human existence is a shared existence (2020, p.72). Now, the other, whether physically present or not must be seen or imagined as present. He or she must be imagined to be present. Also, the other is experienced and not inferred.

This involves the inclusion of the other in the others' strive for survival. To further corroborate the idea of *Dasein*, Zahavi writes that;

Phenomenological analyses reveal that I do not simply exist for myself, but also for another, and that the other does not simply exist for him- or herself, but also for me. The subject does not have a monopoly, either on its self-understanding or on its understanding of the world. On the contrary, there are aspects of myself and aspects of the world that only become available and accessible through others. In short, my existence is not simply a question of how I apprehend myself, it is also a question of how others apprehend me. (2018, p. 665)

From the above quotation, we can infer that the human being is not only a being in the world, but he is also a being with others. To survive, the

individual must pursue his goals and projects such that it will make possible the survival goals of others. The struggle is not limited to his survival alone, but the survival of the other. This idea can be traced to Sartre's 'I choose, I also choose for the rest of mankind' (2007, p. 25). Sartre writes that when we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, he is choosing all men (2007, p. 24). To manage conflicts, the individual must always capture the presence and consciousness of the other. In choosing and coming up with decisions I am indirectly choosing for others. By joining a trade union, joining a political party, getting married, becoming a Christian, and fighting for my rights, by anything I do, I am implicitly prescribing the same course of action to the rest of humanity. To put it another way, all my actions are recommendations. By acting I set an example for all similarly placed others to follow. I am obliged at every instant to perform actions which are examples (Sartre 2007, p. 192).

Arendt also linked freedom to politics. In ancient times, freedom was not a concern of philosophy, She argues, since it was a phenomenon of the political realm such as justice or equality; hence, irrelevant as an issue of reflection. Freedom only seldom in times of crisis or revolution seem to be the direct aim of political action but it is the reason that men live together in political organization at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless (Arendt 1968, p.146). Freedom requires plurality. It needs the company of others. It means being in public, meeting and acting in concert with others, and acting in concert. It's a vital tool for politics and therefore, any political realm should let freedom make its appearance. She called the common ground for politics the political arena. That is the polis, or the table that we gather around to discourse and come to a common ground on issues. Arendt (1958, pp. 198-199) writes that the *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state with a physical location. It can be likened to an imaginary ground where people gather to act and speak together; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.

The public realm is that space common to everyone where political activities are carried out. She makes this distinction between the private and public realms to detangle politics from other spheres of human life. It is only in these places that politics can be practiced because it is only in these public realms humans experience the existence of others and where

opinions can be openly expressed. Aside from this human plurality aspect of this common ground, to be able to practice politics, a material space is required which is actively involved in the dynamics of how we do politics. Furthermore, unlike the private realm, the public one is plural, that is, it contains a vast number of different and even contradictory perspectives (Alexey and Alexey, 2017, p. 514). In *The Human Condition* (1958), she talks about the idea of a table as an analogy for that space, our shared political world; a table that relates people together with a common cause, and at the same time separates them by sitting in their chairs and having their stances. To corroborate this she writes:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate, and to separate them. (Arendt 1958, p. 52)

According to Arendt, being human is been political, and we have to go out in public, take place at that table, and speak out. Plurality is therefore required for political action. This means that action is the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, which corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the condition*—not only the *condition sine qua non* but the *condition per quam*—of all political life. (1958, p. 7). She often has in her mind the great polis where free and equal citizens discuss what matters to them. Politics for her is the realm in which we exchange our ideas together in the context of what she calls plurality. We come up with ideas of what we think, and what we want to achieve. For her, it's a process of thinking, talking together, and acting about the world. The idea of political life is the highest realm of what it means to be human. It's how individuals in plurality or community with others were possible.

Hannah Arendt, in *On Violence*, argues that the phenomenon of violence is a negation of her idea of politics as friendship and plurality. In this work,

she makes a clear distinction between violence and power and argues that government is the rule of law based on the power of the people not on violence. She maintains that all political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them. Power comes from acting in concert with others. Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow (1970, p. 52). It's a kind of action and it's never the property of an individual, it belongs to groups and only remains intact as long as the groups keep together (this in essence is what plurality in politics is about). Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is 'in power' we refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name (1970, p. 44). Power is the ability to act in togetherness. It is manifested when people come together to achieve a goal. An extreme form of power is all against one and is bound up by the very existence of political communities.

The essence of politics is power. It is the attempt to unify a plurality of people who disagree about anything around any project that brings them together and allows them to pursue some ends and goals. Too much violence will lead to the destruction of power and that will mark the end of politics. She argues that most times we equate a nation's power with its capacity for violence and typically see violence as the end or manifestation of power. This can be traced to the history of political thought where political power is taken to mean command or domination. Arendt looks at a kind of power that is contingent upon participation and support. The public realm and political arena, according to Arendt gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other. In this public realm, we can experience reality through multiple viewpoints that is, through plurality. Plurality is therefore essential to politics. If we didn't have a plurality, we would have singularity which will mean that a single human or person can also be a god. All political institutions Arendt claims derive their power from the support of the people and crumble when people no longer support or believe in the authority of these institutions.

From Arendt's ideologies, we can infer that politics includes the twofold aspects of equality and distinction. Equality denotes equal access to the political domain where one can speak to others and act with others. To

throw more light on this she writes that; 'the space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized' (Arendt, 1958, p. 199). Distinction, on the other hand, talks about political subjectivity and the meaning of the political. This is another central feature of the polis. The polis was a space for only 'equals'. This concept of equality in Arendt has nothing to do with social or economic equality, but the freedom to participate in politics and the freedom to act in togetherness or concert with others in the polis. To corroborate this, she writes:

To be free meant to be subject neither to the necessity of life nor to the command of another; it meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. The equality of the political realm has very little in common with our modern concept of equality; it meant to live among and to have to deal only with one's peers, and it presupposed the existence of 'unequal' who, as it were, were always the majority of the population in the city-state. Equality, far from being connected with justice as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership. (Arendt, 1958, pp. 32-33)

Political equality, therefore, ensures that society is truly a society of collective action. This also leads to the politics of inclusion which gives every adult citizen a fair chance to equally engage in political activities.

Conclusion

It is important to reiterate that Arendt posits that plurality is the condition of our existence as humans. The basic condition that makes us political beings is that we exist in the plural. It is necessary to exercise freedom (political freedom gives room for freedom of action). It is important to note that freedom is exercised only in the presence of others. It comes with the desire to live in concert with others. This means that any activity that tries to deny us from freely participating in politics robs us of our freedom as humans. Acting in concert with others is what brings about power which is essential for politics. Politics is that realm of plurality and equality where humans are at liberty to bring forth their ideas and dialogue with others through speech and action. Where there is no speech and action there is no freedom to act in concert with others. Free speech matters because it exposes us to

opinions different from ours. It also expands our understanding and experience of the world. In encountering unexpected and disagreeable opinions, our imagination of the world must change and so too our thinking. We must either alter our opinion, embrace a new opinion or reaffirm our old opinion. In each of these instances, we embrace that which is fully consonant with the plurality of the world as a whole.

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