

Freedom and Responsibility: A Discussion by Hannah Arendt

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Abstract

Contemporary society and politics are facing many challenges and changes, and Hannah Arendt's ideas are important for us to deal with those. The purpose of this paper is to explore Arendt's theory of freedom and responsibility and analyze its implications for contemporary society and politics. Arendt sees responsibility as an important factor in driving social progress, emphasizing the importance of a shared public sphere for freedom. She calls for the reconstruction of the public sphere and promotes the development of citizens' awareness and capacity for political participation. By emphasizing individual responsibility and re-establishing the public sphere, we can promote the development of a free society and the realization of individual freedom.

Keywords

Freedom Theory, Political Freedom, Public Sphere, Responsibility, Sense of Communion, Personal Freedom

1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt is one of the most important political philosophers of the twentieth century, and her ideas have had a profound impact on our understanding of freedom, power, and political life. Freedom is a central concept in Arendt's political philosophy, and she argues that freedom is the reason why people live together in political organizations. Arendt's doctrine of freedom is important not only for explaining political phenomena in the past but also for understanding and reflecting on the socio-political situation of modernity in the present. Through the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany, the experience of drifting as a stateless stranger inspired Arendt to search for solutions to the problems of modernity. Arendt firmly believed that modernity threatens human freedom, but that modernity cannot destroy our freedom. Human thought can help

people to cope with unprecedented problems, to take responsibility, and then to get out of the dilemma and into freedom.

Freedom is one of the most important basic concepts in contemporary political philosophy, and liberalism, with freedom as its central element and goal, is also a prominent theme in contemporary Western political philosophy. When we talk about Hannah Arendt's idea of freedom, what are we talking about? Or what kind of freedom are we talking about, and what should be the scope of freedom?

Arendt's emphasis on the importance of freedom is related to her own particular experience. As a German-Jewish woman, she lived through the political turmoil of the twentieth century, fleeing to France and drifting as a stateless person for many years before settling in the United States. These rich experiences made her realize that it is extremely dangerous to be politically apathetic or disengaged and that those who lack political action are helpless in times of political crisis and that this is precisely the kind of political awareness and ability to "act with others" that Jews lack. She argues that reliance on natural rights, or human rights derived from natural rights, is not sufficient to protect people in the face of totalitarianism or other forms of violence and that active political participation in the struggle for civil and political rights is required. Not only the Jews, but Arendt points out that the rest of the world may face such problems as well. In the face of totalitarianism or other forms of atrocity, Arendt argues that it is not possible to rely on human rights based on natural rights but rather to be politically active in the struggle for civil and political rights.

Arendt's freedom was primarily a rejection of the freedom of pre-Nazi German Jews to immerse themselves in private life, a freedom that wanted people to be brave enough to take on their own responsibilities, rather than indifferent, and to devote themselves to an active life in the public sphere.

2. What Is Freedom: Individual Freedom and Political Freedom

Arendt's understanding of freedom was influenced by her mentor, Heidegger, and by her predecessors in German philosophy. This understanding of political freedom derives primarily from Heidegger's experience of the ancient Greek city-states, which he drew upon in his account of "Dasein". However, Arendt did not stop at the study of being, as Heidegger did, but further emphasized the importance of an in-depth study of political action. She advocated that people take the political experience of ancient Greece as a model, actively participate in political acts, and pay attention to the life of the public sphere, thus revealing the existential significance of politics. After the Nazis came to power, Arendt expressed her dissatisfaction with the disappointing political performance of many intellectuals, including philosophers. She criticized many intellectuals for their lack of political thought and judgment, for being either apathetic or indifferent to politics or blindly following the Nazis. Her dissatisfaction with these intellec-

tuals' obsession with academics and their indifference to the political sphere is why she always refused to see herself as a philosopher and criticized those professional philosophers who separate academic research from politics. One could even say that she spent her life criticizing those professional philosophers who were obsessed with the ivory tower of academia and despised the political sphere. Rather than pursuing a classical Athenian city-state lifestyle, Arendt wanted to call for active participation in political action, to focus on life in the public sphere, and to shed light on the importance of politics and the virtuous phenomenon of freedom. Her argument emphasizes the existential significance of politics and warns that people cannot be apathetic or inactive toward politics in the face of political crises, but should actively strive for civil and political rights.

When we explore the relationship between freedom and politics, Arendt's view offers an interesting perspective. I see Arendt's freedom as having two aspects: political freedom in the public sphere and personal freedom in the private sphere. These two are mutually reinforcing and develop together. Arendt points out that when we talk about freedom and politics, as mentioned in her lecture *Freedom and Politics*, several associations are triggered. Some of these have to do with the tradition of political thought, others with the historical memories that are embedded in our language, and still others with our own contemporary experience (Arendt, 1960).

2.1. Political Freedom

The first implication of freedom is political freedom. Arendt sees freedom as an active way of life, i.e. political freedom. She emphasizes that freedom is an activity and a practice, not just a moral virtue, but a craft. She defines freedom as the ability to participate in common speech and action, emphasizing that the realization of freedom requires people to actively participate in public affairs and political life. In this sense, "freedom" is an activity, a practice. Freedom is the activity of participating in concerted speech and action. Political freedom is a crucial form of freedom, distinct from individual or social freedom. Political freedom emphasizes the ability of people to participate in common and public affairs and the freedom to play a role in the political process. It is not merely the ability of individuals to enjoy basic rights and make decisions on their own, but a power to participate in and shape public affairs. Political freedom requires people to participate actively in political life and to express their views and interests through public debate, voting, and organized action. Arendt argues that the realization of political freedom requires the establishment of a public sphere, political institutions, and opportunities for civic participation to ensure that people can participate in the decision-making process and not merely passively accept the dictates of political power. Arendt's conception of political freedom thus highlights the importance of political participation, public debate, and civic action, emphasizing the responsibility and power of individuals in shaping their

common political destiny.

Arendt's perspective reminds us to rethink the meaning of freedom and to go beyond a surface-level understanding in pursuit of a higher experience of freedom. Freedom requires shared public space and political action to realize higher goals and values. And this means that political systems are not static buildings, but are constructed and maintained by free people through their actions. This revisited understanding of freedom helps us to better understand and practice the core concept of political freedom.

Arendt sees freedom as a "masterful phenomenon", claiming that this phenomenon is the original and hitherto untheorised experience of freedom in ancient Greece and Rome, hitherto untheorised. She argues that the concept of freedom began to appear in our philosophical tradition only after it had virtually disappeared in the late Roman Empire and that it continues to exist in hidden form in human activity as a human force or "gift" (Arendt, 1960). This phenomenon of freedom has set mankind on a new course of action. Humanity has begun a new action. Some scholars judge Arendt to have sought the classical Athenian city-state life, but is this all that Arendt sought?

2.2. Personal Freedom

Modernity is accompanied by enlightenment and rationality, and self-liberation and historical progress have provided an important source of freedom for human beings. But at the same time, modernity has also brought about problems such as the decline of the public, ethical and moral problems, and the lack of a spiritual home for mankind. In the context of totalitarianism, she points out that totalitarianism deprives individuals of their freedom, transforms the multitude of individuals into a single whole, and extinguishes the uniqueness and plurality of each individual. Although Arendt does emphasize political freedom in the public sphere, individual freedom remains the guarantee of political freedom. And totalitarianism poses a great threat to both kinds of freedom.

In "What is Freedom" Arendt emphasizes that "inner freedom" is by definition independent of politics (Arendt, 1961). George Kateb thus argues that her turn to the difficulties of the will was a necessity: "She knew that spontaneous action, freedom as free will, was conceptually problematic, but that unless the concept was true, freedom was a lie. Although she always insisted that individual free will was distinct from political freedom, ... to defend the freedom of politics would undoubtedly involve a philosophical defense of free will." (Kateb, 1977) This means that Arendt considers freedom of the will to be a personal freedom.

Arendt distinguishes between individual freedom and political freedom. Individual freedom refers to the autonomy and choice of the individual in the private sphere and does not appear to be directly related to politics. However, to defend political freedom, Arendt argues that a philosophical defense of free will is needed. Arendt argues that free will is one of the most fundamental faculties of human beings as political beings; it is the faculty by which judgment is an actor.

An individual's free will enables him or her to participate in political life in the public sphere to promote social change and achieve political freedom. There is another expression of this individual freedom, the plural nature of man. Each person is unique in his or her way, and not everyone is a screw in a totalitarian machine. Arendt emphasizes that plurality is an important part of what constitutes people's political life, which encompasses the uniqueness and independent existence of the individual. Each person is a unique individual with his or her views, interests and values, and it is in the public sphere that this plurality can be realized and played out. Each person is a unique individual, which is why the public sphere and politics are necessary. Since then, political freedom and individual freedom have been linked. Individuals realize their plurality and commonality and work for freedom by participating in the public sphere and political life. Individual freedom and plurality are interconnected with political freedom and together they constitute the traits required of a politically active individual. In Arendt's view, individual freedom and the responsibility of political actors complement each other and together contribute to social progress and the realization of freedom.

Arendt argues that plurality is an important part of what constitutes people's political life and that it requires individuals to actively participate in the public sphere, to give voice to their views, and to work with other citizens for the betterment of society. It therefore emphasizes the need for people to actively participate in the socio-political sphere to achieve self-publicity, and this active participation is called positive action in action theory. Implicit in plurality is the freedom of the individual. In this process, individuals realize their plurality and publicity by participating in the public sphere and political life and by working for their freedom. Individual freedom and plurality are interrelated with political freedom, and together they constitute the qualities required of an individual who is actively engaged in politics. In Arendt's view, individual freedom and the responsibility of political actors complement each other and together contribute to social progress and the realization of freedom.

Related to this is Arendt's distinction between the responsibilities of political actors and those of intellectuals, which is essentially a question of responsibility in the public sphere and responsibility in the private sphere. Arendt wants people to act actively in the public sphere, to engage in political life in the public sphere and to take responsibility, to think without reference to the private sphere, to think with a sense of reason and judgment, to examine responsibility from the sidelines, and then to act again.

In short, Arendt's view can be synthesized and interpreted as follows: freedom is closely related to will, thought, and action. Individual freedom and political freedom are different, but the plural nature of the individual and positive action play an important role in advancing political freedom, and the two can be merged into one. Individuals realize their plurality and publicness through positive action and public participation, thereby promoting social change and fight-

ing for freedom. This understanding links the freedom of the individual with the responsibility of political actors, emphasizing the importance of the individual's pursuit of his or her freedom and of political action to achieve it.

2.3. The Active Life, Action, and Political Freedom

Arendt looks at human life in terms of early human activity and makes some distinctions in human life: labor, work, and action. Of these three, only action expresses the highest human potential and possibility, freedom. Arendt's view of action is influenced by Aristotle's ideas about the city-state, and she argues that only through active participation in the public sphere can the individual gain freedom, which she calls the "positive view of freedom" as opposed to the "negative view of freedom". In the English formulation of the concept of positive freedom, we can see an emphasis on action, which Arendt explores about the concept of active life in the public sphere. Action is the political activity of the individual in the public sphere, embodying the plurality and freedom of the individual. Action is not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself. Arendt argues that the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and the experiential site of freedom is action. Under the concept of "active life," Arendt emphasized the existence of the human being as a subject of action. She appreciated the consistency of thought and action in the life of the ancient Greek city-state, considered the experience of the city-state as the basis of political practice, and emphasized the importance of political life - active life. In Arendt's view, if people want political freedom, they must enter the public sphere, so that the path to freedom is one of practice rather than mere study. Therefore, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt elevates the Greek city-state as the basic practical political experience, emphasizing the importance of political life, of a common distinction of an active life, "a world in which people are connected and at the same time can express their individuality". (Arendt, 1958)

In addition to this, action does not take place in an ends-means relationship; action itself serves as an end in itself. "The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and the experiential site of freedom is action." (Heuer et al., 2011) This statement shows, on the one hand, that in Arendt, freedom is closely linked to action. On the other hand, it shows Arendt's unique view of freedom that it is only in action that freedom can be truly attained. Freedom is a practical activity. This freedom, which can only be won in action, is also the true essence of politics.

But Arendt argues that action still has certain drawbacks, on the one hand in the immutability and unpredictability of action that Arendt himself mentions. That is, it is difficult for the individual to fully grasp the course of events in the public sphere as a whole, and therefore this course may be detrimental to individual well-being. This may also be a reason why people always tend to avoid the uncertainty of the public sphere, and thus action. On the other hand, what Arendt seeks to establish in action is the uniqueness of each individual or a kind of protection of plurality, but plurality leads to conflict to a certain extent, and

then it seems that in dealing with this conflict people have the same tendency to think more in their position than in the public position or the position of the others. Pluralism and individual uniqueness can lead to conflict and bias, making it difficult for people to maintain their positions and thinking in the public sphere. Therefore, Arendt's goal is to find a basis and grounding that enables individuals to sustain their participation in action in the public sphere to overcome prejudice, and Arendt finds the capacity for judgment in the life of the mind.

3. The Community and Responsibility

3.1. A World That Cannot Exist Alone: Community

As mentioned above, the public sphere plays an important role in Arendt's view. It is the place where people engage in action and practice, and it is a crucial area for the realization of freedom and the unfolding of individual potential. In the public sphere, individuals communicate and interact through words and actions, influencing and shaping the community through equal speech and persuasion rather than violence. The public sphere is where individuals participate in the practice of democracy and where individuals can express their opinions and views. The individual, as a member of the community, assumes responsibility for what happens in the community, even if the individual himself is not personally involved in it. Therefore, the community is a world from which the individual cannot be separated and in which the individual plays an active role, participates in the public sphere, and is responsible for the interests and development of the community.

It is the responsibility of each individual to be involved in political activities. It is important to note that the individual here is not an individual in liberalism, but an individual "belonging to a community". This is a very important concept because it is a world from which no one can be isolated. "I must be responsible for something I did not do because I must be a member of a community" (Arendt, 2003), the individual must be responsible for what happens in the community, even if the individual does not personally participate in it. Individual responsibility requires the individual to play an active role in the community, participate in public affairs, and take responsibility for the interests and development of the community. This view of Arendt emphasizes the importance of individual action and responsibility. It contrasts with philosophers who are "immersed in ivory-tower philosophical studies". Arendt's point of view amounts to a response to and a rejection of the political indifference of Modernity, and instead pinpoints the fact that "man already lives in the world" - "man is (must be) already a member of the community and so the individual must be responsible for what happens in the community and cannot stand by and do nothing." (Arendt, 1943)

In overview, Arendt's perspective emphasizes individual action and responsibility in the public sphere. Individuals realize the importance of freedom and the

realization of their potential by actively participating in the public sphere, demonstrating actions, and taking responsibility. At the same time, individuals are also aware of their responsibilities as members of the community, taking responsibility for the interests and development of the community and participating in solving the political problems facing the community. Arendt's perspective reminds us that, as part of the community, we cannot be detached from the world and should actively participate in public affairs and take responsibility for the interests and development of the community.

3.2. Active Living in the Public Sphere

As discussed earlier, in Arendt's view, the rise of the social sphere and the concomitant decline of the political sphere are the fundamental changes that have taken place since modernity. People have become more and more obsessed with social living, but have neglected political life, which for Arendt is the sphere in which human dignity, freedom, and meaning are realized. But along with the economic and social development and capitalism, politics is constantly receiving the encroachment of economic affairs and the consequence of this behavior is the rise of the social sphere and the decline of the political sphere. Human dignity can only be restored if people are allowed to answer to political life in the public sphere and assume political responsibility. The search for the public sphere and individual responsibility is also essentially a search for the unity of theoretical and active life. In the ancient Greek city-states, the relationship between theory and action, or philosophy and politics, was real, and thus freedom was about participating in political action and assuming political responsibility in the public sphere, and the two were completely unified. However, with contemporary economic, technical, and cultural developments, political and philosophical life has been severed, creating a host of problems. Arendt's goal was to re-promote the life of the city-state and to make people aware of the importance and necessity of the unity of theory and action.

Arendt profoundly recognized that in the Western societies of his time, the economy and property, which originally belonged to the private sphere, had flourished, leading to a growing tendency to move away from political society and return to the private sphere. This phenomenon revealed a forgetfulness of acting in the public sphere as a fundamental way of being human. This forgetting opens up possibilities for the development and expansion of totalitarianism. Arendt's reinterpretation and application of the concept of the "public sphere" has broadened the horizons of political philosophy and is seen as an important contribution to it. Action is an activity in the public sphere. The unfolding of the public sphere requires the free action of individuals, and the free action of individuals needs to take place in the public sphere (Arendt, 1958).

For Arendt, politics is a public activity in which speech is the main form, in which citizens become themselves in political action, complete their development, and also nurture a great public spirit, and in which human freedom is

based on the political interactions of these people. Arendt emphasizes the importance of the public sphere, an open, free space in which people can engage in public dialogue, debate, and decision-making. The public sphere is the foundation of political activity and provides individuals with the opportunity to voice their opinions, express their interests, and participate in decision-making. Through participation in the public sphere, people can realize their political identity and play an active role in social affairs. This process of political participation and public dialog allows people not only to express their demands and views but also to understand the positions and interests of others, thus facilitating the formation of common understanding and consensus. In this process, people's actions are recognized and respected, and their freedom and dignity are safeguarded.

3.3. Action: The Realization of the Freedom of the Community

Arendt asserts that human action is free and that “freedom neither precedes nor follows action; for to be free and to go into action are the same thing” (Wang, 2014). Thus, the concepts of freedom and action are connected. Our idea daily is that “Freedom is a property of will and thought not of action” (Wang, 2014). Putting the will, or what is called thought, in the first place, it is thought that rational cognitive thought must have preceded the utterance of an action. Arendt's doctrine of freedom attacks the liberal view that liberalism holds up the banner of freedom. But in reality it pushes the cause of all actions to necessity. In Arendt's view, she argues that the so-called concept of freedom of the will did not exist in antiquity and that freedom was only a specialized political term in both ancient Greece and Rome. In ancient Greece, it was the essence of city-state life. Freedom in ancient Rome was the essence of citizenship, and the status of a free man meant freedom from slavery, protection of the law, and so on. In any case, in antiquity, “freedom was an objective physical state, not a material of consciousness or mind. Freedom meant that a person could do what he liked.” (Arendt, 1961)

Arendt points out that totalitarianism capitalizes on people's addiction to the private sphere to stop them from acting, gradually excluding them from the shared world and forcing them to retreat into private life. Totalitarianism further divides people into categories, replacing the independent individual. This led to the gradual erasure of the communal and plural nature of human beings, thus depriving people of their freedom. Arendt emphasizes that freedom is necessary for people to be human and that people can only achieve freedom if they act in the public sphere.

4. Freedom under a Sense of Communitarian Responsibility

In Arendt's thought, she points to the importance of individual responsibility in restoring human dignity and realizing true freedom. Individual responsibility requires people to assume moral and ethical responsibility in the face of choices

and actions. Individual freedom and responsibility are interdependent, and it is only through assuming individual responsibility that individuals can truly realize freedom. After observing and reflecting on the Eichmann trial, Arendt emphasizes Eichmann's thoughtlessness and the alienated nature of man. She argues that these behaviors enabled Eichmann to participate in evil acts without thinking he was doing evil at all. Individual responsibility is particularly important in the context of totalitarianism, which destroys traditional moral codes and values. Individual responsibility requires people to think and judge independently and to take responsibility when faced with moral choices. Freedom and human dignity can only be truly realized through autonomous individual choice and action.

In Arendt's thought, freedom and responsibility are interrelated. Individual responsibility requires people to assume moral and ethical responsibility in the face of choice and action. Individual responsibility is the prerequisite and foundation of freedom because freedom can only be truly realized based on the individual's ability to think, judge, and act autonomously. Individual responsibility makes the individual an active participant in social and political behavior rather than a passive conformist. Individual freedom and responsibility are interdependent, and it is only by assuming individual responsibility that individuals can truly realize freedom. Individual responsibility is particularly important in the context of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism destroys traditional moral norms and values and deprives people of the basis of judgment. Under such circumstances, individual responsibility becomes the key to rebuilding moral and ethical order. Individual responsibility requires that people do not merely submit to authority or the collective, but think and judge independently so that they can resist the temptations and oppression of totalitarianism.

Arendt's thinking about individual responsibility was greatly influenced by her observation of the Eichmann trial. She notes that people generally avoid the responsibility of making judgments, especially in contexts that are categorized as collectively guilty or collectively innocent. This avoidance allows people to avoid individual responsibility, but it also deprives them of the ability to make judgments about good and evil. Concerned about the importance of individual responsibility in restoring human dignity and realizing true freedom, Arendt argues that it is only through the practice of individual responsibility that people can become truly free individuals. Through her observation of the Eichmann trial, Arendt reveals the tendency of people to avoid individual responsibility in general, especially in contexts where they are categorized as collectively guilty or collectively innocent. This avoidance allows people to escape individual responsibility, but it also deprives them of the ability to judge good and evil. Arendt argues that it is only through the practice of individual responsibility that people can become truly free individuals, especially in terms of judgment and moral responsibility. At the same time, Arendt also recognizes the evil consequences of not thinking. Failure to think then affects "the question of good and evil, and whether our ability to distinguish between good and evil can be linked to our

ability to think. This also means that Arendt reflects on the moral responsibility of the individual to live under totalitarianism in terms of human nature, and this moral responsibility extends further to political responsibility, which is what Eichmann did. The importance and necessity of careful reflection on how Arendt thinks about the human spirit in terms of its courageous political responsibility is extraordinarily evident in light of the problems of modernity. This failure to think is not unique to Eichmann but can be produced in any population, and it can even be said that many people under the Nazis shared this "banality of evil. An unthinking life was taken for granted by the masses, whom Arendt describes as "co-responsible irresponsible" (Arendt, 2006).

In short, the Eichmann trial had a significant impact on Arendt, making her aware of the evils of unthinking judgment and provoking her to think about individual responsibility and judgment. She pointed out that traditional moral codes lost their effectiveness under totalitarian rule, and that people needed to rely on individual judgment to discern right from wrong. Arendt argues that only through the practice of individual responsibility can people truly become free individuals. She criticizes those who shun individual responsibility, arguing that they deprive themselves of the ability to judge good and evil and evade responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This highlights the importance of individual responsibility in the public sphere and the importance of realizing true freedom. Arendt does not consider validity to be the most important issue of political judgments, the affirmation of human freedom is.

Arendt's observation of the Eichmann trial reveals the problem of individuals losing their judgment under totalitarianism. In such situations, people often avoid making judgments and place blame on the collective to escape possible guilty verdicts. Arendt, however, sees the practice of individual responsibility as the key to restoring human dignity and realizing true freedom. She calls on people to rethink their judgment and courageously take personal responsibility (Zerilli, 2005).

5. Conclusion

To summarize, Arendt's thought provides us with insightful reflections on modernity. She emphasizes the importance of individual freedom, political participation, and the public sphere, and critiques the banality of power, authority, and Eichmann's evil. Her response reminds us to re-examine the values and behaviors of modern society, to think and rethink the question of responsibility, and thus to conduct our lives in the community and achieve true human freedom.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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