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Arendt's Example

Hannah Arendt Prize Ceremony

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When Hannah Arendt received a prize in Denmark at the end of her life, she said she accepted it with "the fundamental gratitude which leaves us helpless whenever the world offers us a true gift." I do so in the same spirit. She thought of honor as form of luck, rather than anything with a connection to justice or desert. So I thank you for my good luck, and for your generosity, kindness and faith in my work.

Instead of giving you an *apologia pro mea vita*, I want to speak of Hannah Arendt as an example.

She was an example, first, because she created her own authority. She arrived in New York as a penniless refugee and by her death was widely respected as a public intellectual. She achieved authority by the power of thought. By authority, I mean that she was listened to, respected and widely regarded as a wise woman. I also mean that her influence has survived her and that the argument about her work continues a generation after her death.

Her example helps us to identify what intellectual authority is, and how it differs from other forms of authority. First, it is unconnected with

power. She never exercised power or political influence. But she did exercise intellectual authority. The difference between power and authority relates, obviously, to the capacity for coercion. Those with power can coerce without consent. Those with authority can secure obedience through consent.

An intellectual with authority lacks any possibility of coercing. An intellectuals' characteristic mode is persuasion, argument, rhetoric, and all of these work their effects within a framework of consent, rather than force. Or at least they should. The 'organic intellectuals' of the Communist and fascist eras—who aligned their intellect with political force—ended up exercising considerable coercive power in totalitarian states. But we are not talking about them. We are thinking instead of the intellectual authority that derives from uncoerced consent to the persuasive force of argument and ideas. Arendt had—and still has—this relation to her audience.

She was acutely aware of the coercive power of ideas—not just when they are allied to 'world historical forces' like Communism or fascism. But ideas can have a malign power of coercion even when they are unsullied by an alliance to forms of political power, when they have only the power of systematization and the apparent promise of piercing through appearances to the eternal truth of the world. These claims for ideas—that they reveal the eternal truth of the world—are a source of coercion and an instrument of tyranny.

Religions have been built on such truths—and once allied with religion—these ideas have been given the power to coerce others. But purely secular ideas have also had coercive force when allied to schools of thought—academies and institutions—with the power to enforce them as orthodoxy.

She believed in the possibility of an authority for ideas, and for intellectual life, that was free of any alliance with power, ideology, religion or coercive force. She defended a life of the mind connected to the idea of persuasion: the free changing of a mind in interaction with a logical argument or a claim about the world grounded in evident or falsifiable facts. She was attentive to facts, understood the discipline they impose on thought, appreciated the moral code of empirical scholarship, the proposition that if the theory does not fit the facts, the theory must be changed. This is a moral idea simply because it requires people to admit that they are wrong, and since nobody likes to, everyone can find a morally dubious way to avoid doing so. Facts are stubborn things, and intellectual life has no essential morality unless it submits arguments to the discipline of such facts as we can discover about ourselves and the world we live in.

She knew all there was to know about the destructive impact of ideas because she came from Germany, the world capital of destructive ideas. While she remained true to the German intellectual vocation at its best—its intense conviction that ideas matter more than anything--but

she resisted ideology and abstraction, the besetting vices of German intellectual life. By ideology, I mean any system of thought which takes refuge in its own ethical or political certainty in defiance of the contradictions offered by the plain evidence of the world. By abstraction, I mean the habit, so common among intellectuals, of preferring to live within the beautiful symmetry of propositions rather than in our rough, difficult and endlessly elusive world. By great force of mind, she rendered herself immune to these twin temptations.

Her famous affair with Heidegger needs to be understood in this light. It is not uncommon for young women to be destroyed, morally, by their association with powerful men of ideas. She had actually loved Heidegger, but it is to her credit that he did not destroy her, and that she had the strength to escape the thrall of this most demonic of German masters.

Being Jewish and female may have helped to save her. She knew in 1932 that these twin conditions barred her from belonging to the high priesthood of German intellectual life. So she had no choice but to flee and to establish a life elsewhere. Necessity—being female, being Jewish—became the mother of her own self-invention. She was forced to create the conditions of her own intellectual freedom.

Exile helped too, because she was thrown into a very different intellectual milieu—American, earnest, moralizing, anti-theoretical, provincial, yet empirical and solid too. She admired America, though she

never belonged there or even understood it very well, because America gave her the first experience of constitutional patriotism, an attachment to a state derived not from blood, language, tradition or history, but from the constitutional principles of free peoples.

Let us not be sentimental about America. Exile there was very difficult. We only have to think of other exiles and their fate, Bela Bartok, genius of central European music, for example, dying alone and forgotten in a New York hotel at the end of World War II. Exile is only a salvation for those who are too young to know what exile truly costs, or who are blessed with an intense, stubborn and unsentimental intellectual ambition. She was both young and ambitious.

It required great toughness of mind to make her way in New York. She was a freelance, an editor, a contributor to reviews and journals, before she secured the stability of university posts. The struggle helped to make her work and her voice distinctive. It is worth remembering that some of her finest work was a promiscuous mixture of journalism and ethical reflection, and that Eichmann in Jerusalem was, after all, that item so often despised by university intellectuals, a popular magazine article.

She was tough about the sentimental undertow of emotional affiliation in her own life and about political partisanship, seeing them rightly as enemies of intellectual independence. She had been an active

Zionist before and during the war. After the war, she detached herself from her own Jewish partisanship, often encountering fury and incomprehension at her cool distance to the struggles of the new state. She never enlisted in a cause again. She remained an unattached intellectual, that is to say, an anti-totalitarian liberal who opposed the tyranny of Moscow but who refused to sign up to any ideological anti-Communist crusade. She took her place among the New York liberals of the 1950's—but her work, the Origins of Totalitarianism, for example, was not a piece of salon journalism, not a product of this milieu, but something altogether more ambitious, an attempt to understand the catastrophe she and European culture had lived through.

My own work on human rights has been strongly influenced by the passages in Origins of Totalitarianism, devoted to the return of European natural law, after the catastrophe of 1945, and its reincarnation in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She was the first to say, after the war, that the rights that can save a human being are the political and civil rights that come with membership in a determinate political community. When German Jews had been stripped of their civic membership in German society, when they appealed to their fellow Germans, not as fellow citizens, but as simple human beings, naked and defenseless, it was already more than too late. She famously said that when a man appeals to another man, simply as a man, that is the moment when there is truly nothing human between them. This pitiless

insight does not destroy faith in human rights—but it does inoculate faith with a necessary skepticism, and a necessary skepticism is the best protection against easy disillusion. Arendt teaches us, moreover, that rights cannot be protected by well meaning movements of global cosmopolitanism, appealing to moral universals held to be true everywhere, but only by legitimate and democratic nation states, which guarantee rights as part of their constitutional architecture and which provide clear remedies in law and a guarantee of civic inclusion to all its members regardless of origins. It is citizenship—real actual belonging in political community—not abstract belonging to the human species—which will protect the human rights of all.

She had the tenacity to make the German catastrophe the center of her life's work, from the Origins Of Totalitarianism, through Eichmann in Jerusalem. In an America not centrally concerned, or at least not yet, with the Holocaust, her early essays in the l950's were the first to ask the unanswerable questions: how a *Rechtstaat* had given into a psychopath, how a sophisticated and cultured German society that was neither more nor less anti-Semitic than any other bourgeois milieu in Europe had lent such eager support to genocide; why Jews took so long to understand the unfolding catastrophe and did so little to escape or resist.

She was so unsentimental as to give an impression of cruelty on these questions. It is hard to read the passages in Eichmann in Jerusalem about the complicity of the Jews in their own destruction: the willingness

of the Judenrat, the Jewish organizations who complied with Nazi demands to deliver lists of Jews, whose leaders sought to negotiate their own survival while delivering members of their own community to death. Nothing is more truly painful than the question of Jewish complicity in their own annihilation, and nothing is more difficult to evaluate and judge. Indeed the subject is a crucial test of her entire work: she made moral judgment the central function of the life of an independent intellectual; the correctness of these judgments was the true and final test of an intellectual's authority.

She insisted on intellectual consistency at any price. If Eichmann had no right to deny his moral responsibility for his crimes, the victims who served as his unwilling accomplices, in the Judenrat, had no right to deny their responsibility either. She defended, with vehemence and clarity, the proposition that both victims and perpetrators had their responsibilities. Responsibility, she insisted, was individual. There was no such thing as German war guilt, or Jewish complicity in general. For if everyone was guilty, no one was responsible. But those individuals who claimed that they were helpless pawns of bureaucracy, fate, necessity, were evading the primary responsibility of all individuals: which is to give a credible moral account of their own actions.

She put special emphasis on responsibility because already in her early 20's she had had to make a decision that was a matter of life and death in Germany for a Jew: whether to stay or go. She made the choice

in 1933 and all her life she was to claim that if she had been able to take responsibility for this choice, others could too.

In evaluating her view of responsibility, I have to bring another voice—another intellectual mentor of mine—Isaiah Berlin into this discussion. Isaiah Berlin disliked few intellectuals more than he disliked Hannah Arendt. I have tried to understand how two figures who have meant so much to me could have been so thoroughly opposed. He thought of himself as a *stetl* Jew, a cosy Russian tea-drinking Jew, and he regarded Arendt as the quintessential Yekke, the punctilious, exacting and charmless German Jew. He was a Zionist, and she was too, but with a much more reserved attitude to Israel and its struggles. But there is a feature of their disagreement that went beyond temperament and experience. He thought it was moral impertinence for her to have condemned from a safe exile in New York, the conduct of Jews who collaborated with the Nazis in cities like Riga. But this was partly because his own uncle had been a member of the Judenrat of Riga under Nazi occupation, and Berlin believed that no one could judge what anyone did in a situation of terror and fear. He felt, in short, that she lacked pity, and that her standards of responsibility were guilty of arrogance and cruelty. She had left in 1933, and his family, blind, deluded, eternally hopeful had stayed. Why did she have the right to judge this blindness, or their desperate attempts to stay alive?

Arendt had assumed that the choices that Jewish leaders made under Nazi occupation ought to be judged by the same standards of accountability to be applied to the perpetrators. She quoted her friend Mary McCarthy as saying, "If somebody points a gun at you and says Kill your friend or I will kill you, he is *tempting* you,that is all." Arendt maintained that while it might not be possible to resist direct coercion, it was possible to resist temptation. This standard applied equally to perpetrators and accomplices. Without holding on to such a distinction, Arendt claimed, personal responsibility would be lost altogether.

Yet while it is a temptation for the *perpetrator* to say: Kill your friend or I will kill you", the victim so compelled is under a very direct form of coercion. Arendt has elided two very different experiences: the German perpetrator who could disobey orders that entailed telling others to kill and a Jewish collaborator who knew that the choices were between everyone dying and some dying, between dying then or dying later.

"I was told, "Arendt later said angrily, "that judging itself was wrong: no one can judge who had not been there." But it was one thing to insist on the right to judge Eichmann and his kind; another thing to claim the equivalent right to judge—and condemn—the conduct of Jewish collaborators. The second case required a different kind of judgment, one that does not confuse understanding and forgiveness, but which does insist on empathy as a prelude to judgment. Empathy is not the same as sympathy. Empathy here means the capacity to enter into the

moral world of those faced with intolerable choices and understand how these choices could be made. Empathy implies a capacity to discriminate between the condemnation appropriate to a perpetrator and that of his Jewish accomplice. The accusation here is fundamental: that in making ethical judgment the central function of intellectual life, and its chief claim of authority, Arendt had lacked the one essential feature of judgment: compassion.

If I am accusing someone of a lack of compassion, it would be impudent to do so without a display of it myself. She argued as she did because of her fierce dedication to individual ethical responsibility, and the worst that can be said of her, is that if she lacked compassion, she did so in the best of all possible intellectual causes: to refuse anyone, even victims, the right to evade their responsibility.

Responsibility was a central word to her: the responsibility of men and women in extremity, the responsibility of intellectuals in times of war and peace. She took her own responsibility seriously—and that was why she exerted authority. An intellectual's responsibility was primarily to the truth, or since final truth is elusive, to the moral duty never to falsify, never to take short cuts, never to play with the facts, never to refuse to admit a disobliging exception to a proposition that might make your reputation. So it was a lonely responsibility—a very Protestant idea—of being alone with the God of truth, the one who never speaks, never gives

a sign, never comforts, never intervenes, but who is always there, even if hidden from sight.

All this can be made to sound very austere and severe, and perhaps in her case, it was. Humor was not her strong suit, and she did not convey any sense—at least in the published writing-- that intellectual life can be the most exhilarating and joyful life there is. But it can be. It was Isaiah Berlin—that old hedgehog, who pretended to be a fox—who taught me this.

I have paid her this tribute, because I associate so strongly with her independence, her refusal of easy consolation, her refusal to be enlisted in the ideological wars of her time, her respect for facts, her keen sense of responsibility to truth. It would be absurd to say that I have kept to these maxims. I only say I have been inspired by them. But that is something to say of any intellectual—that her example inspired others. Having opposed Berlin and Arendt, I would conclude by pairing them together as inspirations. I would say of her what I said of Berlin, that they were both models of what an intellectual life should be: skeptical, dispassionate and free.