On the Centrality of the Jewish Experience in the Political Theory of Hannah Arendt

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Introduction

For Hannah Arendt, the crisis of modernity rests in the fact that human nature, defined by its essential capabilities, is at stake.[1] This paper seeks to show that Arendt's understanding of freedom as the essential capability of human being comes from her Jewish intellectual and experiential background. Her fundamental existential experience as a secular, German Jew profoundly shaped her self-understanding as well as her understanding of the world in general. Thus, freedom, as the Jewish experience par excellence and as understood and transmitted through the Passover narrative, comes to serve as the essential capability of man, but more importantly of men in their plurality as they exist in the political world of experiential reality. Arendt's understanding of her own Jewishness, particularly as it relates to the concept of freedom, is ironically discovered in some of her seemingly less "political" writings, such as the collections presented in *The Jewish Writings* and *Men in Dark Times*. It is to those writings that I will turn in order to explicate Arendt's view of freedom and its fundamental reliance on the Passover narrative.

On Human Nature

In her reply to Eric Voegelin's review of her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in *The Review of Politics*, Hannah Arendt presents freedom as an essential capability of human beings.[2] In the crisis of World War II and the atrocities inflicted throughout Europe by Nazi Germany, Arendt experienced what she understood to be the loss of this essential capability. She drew the conclusion that "the success of totalitarianism is

[1] Arendt, Hannah. "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," *Essays in Understanding*. Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1994. Pp.401-408.
[2] Ibid., p.407.

identical with a much more *radical liquidation of freedom* as a political and as a human reality."[3] Due to this liquidation of the essential capability of man, she found "that either man himself is being destroyed or that freedom does not belong to man's essential capabilities."[4] For Arendt, human nature was known through experience: insofar as man experiences himself as man, he can understand the essential elements of his being. Human nature, then, may have an unchanging quality that exists in some eternal form, but this is irrelevant in the realm of human existence in which "no realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities."[5] In other words, Arendt is not primarily interested in whether or not there is an unchanging human nature, but rather, she is concerned with the actualization of fundamental human capabilities. If the potential quality of human being is "liquidated" then that particular understanding of human nature does not serve man in the venture of self-understanding and political existence.

Prior to the submission of his review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Review of Politics*, Voegelin wrote to Arendt, indicating elements of the work he planned to discuss. In his letter to Arendt dated March 16, 1951, Voegelin writes, "Talk of a change of human nature implies the anti-religious revolt against the *imago Dei*. And the attempt to change this nature ends (as you rightly state) with its destruction."[6] From the initial exchange, it is not clear that Arendt is suggesting that human nature can change,

[3] A Reply, p.408, emphasis mine.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress. General, 1938-1976, n.d.---Voegelin, Eric---1951-1972 (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.). Translation by Peter Baehr, used with permission from his unpublished work, "Debating Totalitarianism: An epistolary exchange between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin," p. 12.

but that it can be *denied or suppressed*, as she experienced in her own life. In her reply to Voegelin, she writes,

> "I hardly proposed more change of nature than Professor Voegelin himself in his book on *The New Science of Politics*. . . . In Voegelin's terms, I could have said that after the discoveries of totalitarian domination and its experiments we have reason to fear that man may lose his soul."[7]

It seems Voegelin misunderstands Arendt's analysis; she does not speak directly of a changing human nature, but rather, of the way in which, or the degree to which, human beings appear in the political realm. Freedom is an essential human capacity, but it is not sufficient for human experience; freedom needs expression through human action. Thus, without that action, man may not reflect the actual essence of his being, making him less than human, or dehumanized.

What truly distinguishes Arendt from Voegelin is not the idea of a changing human nature, but her emphasis on the phenomenal realm which she experiences through the lens of her Jewishness and which she seeks to understand through her writing. Her method is itself phenomenological, not concerned primarily with the abstract. In Voegelin's terms, it could be stated that Arendt is not convinced of an abstract human nature, such as the *imago Dei*, but an understanding of human nature derived from the phenomenal world. In this way, a revolt against the *imago Dei* is categorically impossible. Although at one point she studied philosophy, she has "said good-bye to philosophy once and for all."[8] The farewell came upon the realization that there is an intrinsic tension "between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being."[9] She claims that the philosopher, the thinking man, cannot be objective with regard to politics.

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[7] A Reply, p.408.
[8] Arendt, Hannah. "What Remains? The Language Remains," *Essays in Understanding.* New York, Schocken Books, 1994. p.2
[9] What Remains?, p.2.

Thus, because her primary concern was how to exist in the political world of experiential reality, she turned away from "thought" as an end in itself and focused on the phenomenal world of action, as the creative element of human experience.

Arendt's means of understanding the phenomenal world was writing, which allows the abstract to take shape in the phenomenal world. "What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding."[10] In order to understand Arendt, then, it is important to look at all of her writings as part of the process of comprehending. Of particular importance for this paper are the writings found in *The Jewish Writings* and *Men in Dark Times*, two collections of essays that speak to particular events and people and seek to illuminate the world in which Arendt experienced existence. Also, excerpts from various correspondences and lectures collected in the *Hannah Arendt Papers* archival collection at the Library of Congress will be used. In the Introduction to *Men in Dark Times* she writes, "This collection of essays and articles is primarily concerned with persons--how they lived their lives, how they moved in the world, and how they were affected by historical time."[11] She asserts further, that through this type of investigation, in this type of essay, we may "expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering and often weak light" that comes "from their lives and works."[12] In this collection, Arendt discusses ten people who "could hardly be more unlike each other" drawing from various religious, political, national and professional classifications. Because this paper is primarily concerned with understanding her concept of freedom in light of her Jewishness it will rely on the essays

[10] Ibid., p.3.
[11] Arendt, Hannah. *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1968. P. vii.
[12] Ibid.

and articles written specifically about Jewish persons or in which she addresses Jewishness explicitly.[13]

What is *Jewishness*?

Because Arendt experiences the world through the lens of her Jewishness, it is important to discuss her understanding of the Jewish aspect of her identity. In the essays about "men in dark times" and through the act of writing about Jewish qualities, people, and issues, she discloses an understanding of both her Jewishness and her notion of freedom. As a secular Jew, Arendt's "Jewishness" is not a faith-based quality, but is a social and moral concern. She wrote, regarding the "pariahs" and "intellectuals" of European Jewry, "their own Jewishness, which played hardly any role in their spiritual household, determined their social life to an extraordinary degree and therefore presented itself to them as a moral question in the first order."[14] These pariah Jews, and Arendt as a pariah in her own right, were faced with a choice that bears resemblance to both the Israelites of Pharaoh's Egypt and to the choice for a life of action. They could remain inactive, dissembled, effectively concealed individuals living in "lying denial" of their "isolation from reality."[15] Or, if they desired to exist in reality, they would have to embrace the essential human capability, freedom, and from this freedom choose to act. Their Jewishness, then, was the remembrance of their human-ness as it exists in the recognition that man is innately free. This return was embodied, for Arendt, in the resuscitation of the Passover story, the fundamental narrative of the Jewish experience

[13] This is important because although, for example, her first chapter on Lessing is not written about a Jewish person, she speaks directly to what it means to be Jewish.
[14] *Men in Dark Times,* p.183.
[15] Ibid., p.186.

and symbol of freedom and liberation. These concepts lie at the heart of Jewishness as a cultural and ethical quality. More importantly, inasmuch as freedom comes to serve as the foundation upon which her entire political theory rests, her political theory must be understood, then, in terms of this Jewishness. For, without freedom, man is no longer man and can no longer create the polis.

In 1960, in a lecture delivered to the American Political Science Association, Arendt said, "I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for us ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say."[16] While Arendt may draw from many such personal incidents, the Passover story is the most basic narrative that underlies all of her works. It holds, "in a nutshell," the fullest expression of man as a publicly appearing being through action that comes from individual awareness of innate freedom. The way in which Arendt interprets the Passover story and the elements she draws from it are the very elements that comprise both her Jewish writings as well as her fully developed philosophical writings. Thus, it is important to understand how Hannah Arendt understood the Passover story, how she experienced this narrative in her own life, and how this experience manifests in her political theory.

To summarize briefly, the Passover story is told in Exodus and is the account of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Moses was divinely chosen to be the mediator between the Israelites and Pharaoh. He was told, "You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a

[16] Arendt, Hannah. "Action in the Pursuit of Happiness," The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of CongressEssays and lectures---"Action in the Pursuit of Happiness," lecture, American Political Science Association, New York, N.Y.---1960 (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.).

greater might he shall drive them from his land."[17] Repeatedly, Moses and Pharaoh engage in a series of negotiations. Each time Moses requests the freedom of the Israelites, and each time, Pharaoh refuses. Upon each refusal, the Egyptian people are struck down by a plague, which causes Pharaoh to plead with Moses to relieve the burden from his people. The final plague to befall the Egyptians is the death of every firstborn child in all of Egypt. Moses gave the Israelites specific instructions on this day to slaughter a lamb and apply some of the lamb's blood to the lintel and doorposts of their homes to serve as a sign for the Lord. When the Lord sees the blood he will pass over the home and "not let the Destroyer enter" and smite any in the household.[18]

The story of liberation from the oppression of Pharaoh in Egypt came to hold a significant place in the hearts and minds of Jewish people throughout history, eventually evolving into a springtime festival. For many years the Passover festival (Pesach) was celebrated in individual homes, bringing together small bands of Jews to participate in the activity of remembering the story of their deliverance. The Passover festival was celebrated at the start of spring, at the same time as, but in a different manner than, the Festival of Matsos (Unleavened Bread). "The Feast of Unleavened Bread was observed by the entire community gathered in a holy place, while Pesach was celebrated in the home as a family festival."[19] The two festivals were combined under the rule of Josiah, when Jerusalem became the one sanctuary for all Jews and the location of all festivals. The exodus occurred in the first spring month of the year; thus, it was natural to adapt the pre-existing spring festivals to the newer, more significant event in Jewish history. "Spring, the time of liberation for nature, and the idea of human freedom seemed to fit

[17] Exodus 6:1, JPS.
[18] Exodus 12:23, JPS.
[19] Schauss, Hayyim. *Pesach: A Jewish Festival*. Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2010. P.43

very well together; in this way Pesach became the festival of the freedom of the Jewish people, its deliverance from slavery, and its awakening to a new life."[20] Thus, Pesach was moved out of the house (the private realm) and into society (the public realm) when the festival was celebrated at one central place, the Temple in Jerusalem. People were literally united in time and space at this festival and Passover became "a symbol of the striving of the people toward *national* freedom."[21]

After the destruction of the Second Temple, Pesach underwent further changes and "the importance of the festival grew and . . . it became, in time, the greatest Jewish *national* holiday."[22] The activities of Passover, including those carried over from the Festival of Matsos were assigned new symbolic meanings and interpretations whereby "the freeing of Jerusalem from foreign rule became the main item." [23] The festival no longer concerned individual liberation or redemption, but celebrated the collective freedom of the entire nation. "Pesach now attained still greater importance as the anniversary of the deliverance from the first exile."[24] Thus, the Passover narrative and the Passover festival underwent changes as the Jewish people evolved and history unfolded. While the Passover story as a religious narrative is arguably a story of responding in faith to the actions of YHWH, the Passover experience came to be an annual remembrance of the recognition of the freedom that allowed the Israelites to reemerge as a nation. No longer necessarily faith based, but national-identity oriented, the secular understanding of the Passover story is one in which reality and phenomenal

[20] Ibid., p.44.
[21] Ibid., p.45. Emphasis mine.
[22] Ibid., p.46. Emphasis mine.
[23] Ibid., p.56.
[24] Ibid.

existence have replaced a life in relationship with YHWH. The emphasis is on acting rather than in responding to the actions of YHWH.[25]

As a secular Jew, Arendt participated in the festival of remembrance. While it would be speculative to assume that she participated in the festival every year, it can be assumed that she celebrated the holiday as a child, while under the influence of her paternal grandparents and under the tutelage of Rabbi Vogelstein.[26] Also, in1975, the year she died, she celebrated Pesach with a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Louis Finkelstein. Dr. Finkelstein wrote a letter to Arendt in February of 1975 inviting her to celebrate Pesach, "I wonder whether it would be convenient for you to come to the seder at my home this year again, as you did last year."[27] Arendt replied, "I'll come with great pleasure."[28] Whether she consistently participated in the annual celebration of Passover, recalling the experience of freedom, is not clear; what is clear is that at the beginning of her life and at the end of her life the Passover experience was present.

As Michael Walzer points out, the story of the Exodus "is a common reference point" that has been used by many people in many different ways. For example,

> "[It] figures prominently in medieval debates over the legitimacy of crusading warfare. It is important to the political argument of the radical monk Savonarola … It is cited in the pamphlets of the German peasants'

[25] One can see in the evolution of the meaning of Passover the move from the spiritual to the phenomenal world; this is similar to Arendt's move from philosophy to politics and further supports the idea presented here.
[26] "Neither of Hanah Arendt's parents was religious. But they sent their daughter to the synagogue with her Arendt grandparents, and they maintained good relationships with Rabbi Vogelstein and his family." Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World.* New Haven:Yale University Press, 1982. p.9.
[27] The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, General, 1938-1976, n.d.---"Fa-Fram" miscellaneous---1958-1975, n.d. (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.). Image 005968.
[28] Ibid., Image 005969.

> revolt. John Calvin and John Knox justified their most extreme political positions by quoting from Exodus."[29]

However, for Arendt, it is a political narrative par excellence—a story that highlights the human condition of plurality and the ways in which the human essence of freedom is brought to the phenomenal world through action in order eventually to create the space of appearance and ultimately to establish justice. In the Passover story one can see Arendt's understanding of human nature, and more importantly, of man as political being. This traditional Jewish story holds the fundamental elements of human nature and the requisite elements to the human experience of reality.

The Jewish Experience

Arendt makes reference to the Passover story in many of her Jewish writings and claims that this narrative teaches "the difference between freedom and slavery" and calls to mind "the eternal rebellion of the heart and mind against slavery."[30] The Passover narrative is an invitation to the heart, as the seat of will, and the mind, as the seat of thought, to recognize the inherent freedom to experience existence by moving to action. Freedom is a value that resides in the "heart and mind" of the individual; it exists from birth and always has the potential to express itself in the public realm. However, freedom is first innate, individual, and private. Freedom becomes a matter of public interest only after the polis is established. In the polis works to maintain "the function of the public realm" which is "to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in word and deed … who they are and what they can do."[31]

[29] Walzer, Michael, *Exodus and Revolution*. USA: Basic Books, 1985. p.5.
[30] *The Jewish Writings*, p.150.
[31] *Men in Dark Times*, p.viii.

In "Moses or Washington," one of the short biweekly articles published in *Aufbau*, Arendt discusses the importance of the Passover story for the Jewish people. She writes, "It is a dreadfully long time now since Moses led the children of Israel up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Even the renowned memory of the Jews, the memory of an ancient people that holds to this myth of its foundation, is beginning to deteriorate."[32] She finds the deterioration of the Jewish memory of the Passover story to be particularly dangerous for the Jewish people and blames modernity for the downfall. "When Reform rabbis took control of our national feasts a hundred years ago … they did achieve one thing: they destroyed the legends of its founding."[33] In essence, the Reform rabbis removed the living meaning of the Passover story and turned it into a story of an ancient people. They dissociated the Jewish experience from the Jewish people, thereby leaving the modern Jews with nothing more than a long history. "This 'reform,' which ruthlessly and nonchalantly removed all national, all political meaning from the tradition, did not reform that tradition … it merely robbed it of its living meaning."[34]

The Passover story "contains as in a nutshell" the essence of Jewishness and the Jewish people; therefore, it is essential for Arendt that this story remains alive. The Passover story is "living" insofar as it tells the story of the manifestation of human being through the experience of freedom. As long as this meaning is removed from the Passover story, then it is "dead and mute to no one more than the very people who once wrote it."[35] The Passover story is not only the myth of the Jewish people—it is the basis of their political existence. The past of the Jewish people is a burden as long as it is a

[32] *The Jewish Writings*, p.149.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., pp.149-150.
[35] Ibid.

lifeless, meaningless ancient history. But, the burden can "become a blessing, that is, a weapon in the battle for freedom" as soon as modern Jews understand it in "the present and fight for a better future."[36] Jewishness, as expressed in the Passover story and understood to be freedom, must be remembered and used to re-engender the Jewish people as a political, existing entity.

In the Passover story, the Israelites were considered a "people" only insofar as they were oppressed together as a group. They may have been a different sort of people at one time, but the simple fact of their inactivity while under the oppression of Pharaoh made their being together an impossibility. Individuals can only exist as a people when they are acutely aware of their inherent freedom and choose to act as individuals and thereby create the space of the community. Individual Israelites were told, "Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover offering. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts."[37] Each individual had the choice to partake in this specific action. The act was not an attempt to attain freedom; the act was done as an expression of freedom. Arendt insists that European Jews must act in the same way the Israelites did because "without their active participation there is no way to put an end to the tragic Jewish problem."[38] Freedom is the subjective element that exists prior to any action; it is "not a reward for sufferings endured."[39] For Arendt, this is a prelude to political community insofar as freedom precedes the actions that create the polis. Once the polis is established within the space of appearance a tribal identity can be, and many

[36] Ibid.
[37] Exodus 12:21-22, JPS
[38] *The Jewish Writings*, p.198.
[39] Ibid., p.263.

times is, established. However, the primary result of free action is the formation of the polis.

In "The Jewish War That Isn't Happening," a series of articles published in *Aufbau*, Arendt makes a constant appeal to Jews to recognize that "our freedom and our honor hang in the balance" just as much as the freedom and honor of the nations that had been conquered by Nazi Germany.[40] It was her call to remembrance and it had one central purpose: the formation of a Jewish army. Just as Moses called the Israelites to act together by coating their doorposts with blood and to walk out of Egypt as a people, Arendt called the Jews from all over the world to act together by forming an army and to either die or survive as a people. She makes the case "that you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as. A person attacked as a Jew cannot defend himself as an Englishman or Frenchman."[41] Unless the Jewish people gathered under one flag, a Jewish flag, they would never experience the freedom that is the fundamental basis of political action, the essence of human being, and founder of political community. "For only within the framework of a people can a man live as a man among men, without exhausting himself."[42] The formation of the Jewish army would be the first step in establishing the Jewish people as a people once again. Palestine would remain a refugee asylum until the Jewish people recognized that "*the defense of Palestine is part of the struggle for the freedom of the Jewish people*."[43] This action would manifest the freedom of the individual Jew and unite all Jews together in the activity of defense.

[40] Ibid., p.137.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., p.297.
[43] *The Jewish Writings*, p.137. Emphasis mine.

Freedom in the Polis

Freedom first belongs to the private realm of human existence insofar as it resides in the individual and is not dependent upon other beings for its existence. Its manifestation, however, comes through action, which is implicitly a public matter because it automatically creates the space of appearance, or the polis. Once the polis is established, and a collective identity is assumed within the space of appearance wherein a group of people commune, freedom, too, becomes public. Just as freedom is the essential capability of the individual in the private realm, it is the essential capability of the community in the public realm. In the second chapter of *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses the transformation that has occurred in the private and public realms since ancient times. She claims that in the ancient world the public and private realms of individual existence were strictly separated. However, "in the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself."[44] In the modern world what once was public has become private, making freedom part of the process of creating and organizing the polis. However, because freedom is first and foremost private, political freedom is independent of political structures; it is not hindered or liberated by governments and institutions. It is what allows man "to act under conditions of tyranny."[45]

In ancient Greece, Arendt sees the private realm as the realm of the household in which there was a master and those beneath him. Thus, the private realm was characteristically unequal. In the public realm, Arendt saw the possibility for equality

[44] *The Human Condition*, p.33.
[45] Ibid., p.324.

and freedom. She writes, "equality was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed."[46] This seems a bit strange given the fact that in Greece there were slaves and women were not considered citizens. If we understand the public realm as the space wherein individuals appear to one another through free action, however, then this analysis becomes somewhat clearer. The notion of freedom Arendt speaks of is the individual ability to act, which in ancient Greece was realized in the pubic realm. Further, she claims freedom is found in the private realm in both the Passover story and the modern conception of freedom. Thus, when Arendt claims that the Passover story teaches the difference between slavery and freedom, it is the private realm she is referring to. The individual is either free to act or he is not; the slave is not necessarily the man who is chained, bound, or ruled over, the slave is the man who does not recognize that he is free to act. In line with her understanding of Heinrich Heine, "freedom had little to do with liberation from a just or unjust yoke. A man is born free, and he can lose his freedom only by selling himself into bondage."[47] The Israelites were enslaved as a people, but what enabled individuals to act in spite of Pharaoh was their personal, innate freedom. This is a freedom to think, to choose, to act, and essentially, to *be* human.

Conclusion

For Arendt, being "a Jew" was a "*political* fact" that "outweighed all other questions of personal identity or rather had decided them."[48] Her Jewishness was her primary point of contact for self-understanding, so much so that she writes, "I cannot

[46] *The Human Condition*, p.33.
[47] *The Jewish Writings*, p.280
[48] *Men in Dark Times*, p.18.

gloss over the fact that for many years I considered the only adequate reply to the question, Who are you? to be: A Jew."[49] If she understands her Jewishness to be political, meaning that it determines the space of appearance created by her actions, then what lies at the heart of Jewishness, namely freedom, also lies at the heart of her political understanding. She writes, "Freedom of movement is also the indispensable condition for action, and it is in action that men primarily experience freedom."[50] Recall the passage earlier in which she states the purpose of the Passover narrative to be to teach the difference between slavery and freedom. The Passover narrative, as a historical piece of political experience, illuminates the power of freedom as the starting point for all human action. As she writes, "Both action and thought occur in the form of movement and … freedom underlies both."[51] From this, one can look to either interpretation of the Passover story, either as a faith-based response to the actions of YHWH or the politically-oriented action of a nation, to recognize that both are preceded by the essential human capability: freedom. "Freedom is more than independence;" it is the mode through which "man experiences himself."[52] In this way, "freedom is not a concept, but a living, political reality."[53]

It should be noted, finally, that this short essay on the importance of the Passover narrative in Arendt's theory of freedom is but a prelude to a larger work that examines the specifically Jewish elements of Arendt's thought. Therein, it will be argues that her Jewishness pervades other crucial elements of her political theory, namely, action, the space of appearance, and the ever so elusive concept of justice.

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[49] *Men in Dark Times*, p.17.
[50] Ibid., p.9.
[51] Ibid., p.9.
[52] Ibid., p.77.
[53] Ibid., p.82.

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