

WHY DESCRIPTION?

My paper is about Arendt's portrayal of a politics of description – her support for and her demonstration of it – as the basis for meaningful pluralism. “Description” is not a term of art she employs, but I find that it is the descriptor that best fits her general account of what the public realm demands from us, what comprises the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition* (HC), and the methodology of her historical interpretation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (OT).

A politics of description is one that develops a practice of people detailing their view of the world and engaging through words and deeds with the details of another's world as it appears to them. It involves taking *doxa* (opinion) seriously. I want to argue that for Arendt, such involvement in description is the way to make the rights of man practicable; disengagement from and discouragement of endeavours of description pave the path for totalitarianism.¹ It is, therefore, important to value people's descriptions of their view of the world, of their own words and deeds, and of others in the “true space” of the *polis* that “lies between people living together”.²

In her work as a political theorist, Arendt herself weaves such descriptions together. Her historical narratives are remarkable descriptions of descriptions; the painstakingly detailed OT is a testament to the fact that she takes the idea that “it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story” (HC) very seriously.

The title of OT promises its readers a straightforward causal mechanism explaining the development of totalitarianism. What Arendt delivers instead is a description of the events, practices and attitudes conjured up by the unique, modern circumstances under which totalitarianism came about in the 1930s. In doing so, she captures a phenomenon more terrifying than any instance of tyranny or authoritarianism. Readers see that totalitarianism replaces the coercion of the masses with their loyalty – manipulating them through atomization and an ideology of nostalgia meant to serve as a panacea for their essential homelessness.

Totalitarianism, she conveys, is way of organizing people that precludes the existence of a public realm because “like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the labourer or craftsmen prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world,” despite “being capable of deed and word,”³ everybody is discouraged from describing their view of the world if it differs from the layer of the onion closer to the leader. This comparison of the regime to an onion appears in OT in passing – interspersed by descriptions of events for the demonstration of its manifestations.⁴ Later, in *Between Past and Future* (1968), she describes her view of the onion itself in greater detail:

In contradistinction to both tyrannical and authoritarian regimes, the proper image of totalitarian rule and organization *seems to me* to be the structure of the onion, in whose center, in a kind of empty space, the leader is located; whatever he does [...] he does it from within, and not from without or above. All the extraordinarily manifold parts of the movement – the front

¹ “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to that 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 *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life.” (HC, p7)

² *ibid.*, p198.

³ *ibid.*, p199.

⁴ OT, p413 & p430.

organizations, the various professional societies, the party membership, the party bureaucracy, the elite formations, and police groups – are related in such a way that each forms the façade in one direction and the center in the other, that is, plays the role of normal outside for one later and the role of radical extremism for another.”⁵

It seems clear to me that we are free to argue with aspects of Arendt’s description, but it is very difficult to characterize her historical narrative as flatly moralistic. Arendt practices philosophical interpretation and political action through rich, opinionated description; she is not interested dictating truth.

LANGUAGE

Thomas Hobbes appreciates the impulse to use language craftily. “The generall use of Speech,” he says, “is to transferre our Mentall Discourse, into Verbal; or the Trayne of our Thoughts, into a Trayne of Words [...]”⁶ However, this use is accompanied by four potential abuses – misrepresentation due to a lack of understanding of one’s own *doxa*, using words in ways that deviate from an obvious shared understanding, misrepresenting one’s *doxa*, and insulting those one is in conversation with. All of these create obstacles for a politics of description. Hobbes’ solution to this problem is not, of course, amenable to Arendt because it calls for the *Leviathan* to authoritatively set the definitions of words so that geometric reasoning and grounded ratiocination can take place. Nevertheless, Arendt has concerns about linguistic insincerities that map onto Hobbes’ fears about these abuses quite well.

Since the manifestation of freedom is closely associated with the expression of opinion, communicative exchanges must employ language sincerely, and describe deviations from any possible shared understanding of language carefully. A robust public realm must illuminate – not conceal – aspects of the world.⁷ Language games are inevitable in inter-personal interactions because the use of language is part of an activity⁸, but a politics of description is one that does not seek to game language because it aims to appreciate pluralism meaningfully. In my discussion of language here, I refer to its qualities in both speech and writing – as any sort of public intercourse between people.⁹

Freedom itself is a concept that Arendt seems to think is not freely described. She says that it involves the realization of a *vita activa*, but notes that it is often erroneously defined with reference to nature or insincerely associated with the mere absence of constraints.

Slavery’s crime against humanity did not begin when one people defeated and enslaved its enemies (though of course this was bad enough), but when slavery became an institution in which some men were "born" free and others slave, when it was forgotten that it was man who had deprived his fellow-men of freedom, and *when the sanction for the crime was attributed to nature*. Yet in the light of recent events it is possible to say that even slaves still belonged to some sort of human community; their labor was needed, used, and exploited, and this kept them within

⁵ “What is Authority?”, BPF, p99, emphasis mine.

⁶ *Leviathan* (2003), “Of Man”, p25.

⁷ Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, p253.

⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), 23

⁹ Benhabib says in *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration* (2018) that “Arendt, along with Wittgenstein, becomes one of the few twentieth-century thinkers to note the significance of language as speech, as the give-and-take among human beings. Admittedly, this concept of speech is not much developed in her thought, and is interpreted instead through metaphors such as ‘the web of human relationships’.” (p52)

the pale of humanity. To be a slave was after all to have a distinctive character, *a place in society more than the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human.*¹⁰

In this passage we first see that the understanding of constraints has changed over time. When slaves were thought of as having been born slaves, their subjugation was thought of as merely *natural*. Later, the recognition and removal of constraints was thought of as sufficient for freedom. This “freedom” of the emancipated that Arendt describes is not a mistake as much as it is a convenient and misleading rationale for society to alleviate the responsibilities it has towards those it wishes to exclude from the public realm, and to not consider the opinions of those it does not really wish to involve in politics.

Arendt’s description does not imply that every single person who describes the mere removal of constraints as sufficient for equitable inclusion in society has conspired to render the definition of freedom meaningless. (In fact the division between intention and action is unimportant here; it is likely that that is how they would describe freedom to themselves.) She means simply that the experience of (un)freedom itself has not been adequately described in public, so a cohesive shared understanding of remains unreachable.

Through her somewhat genealogical account of the employment of the concept in “What is Freedom?”, she contributes to the public comprehension of it. She explains that while freedom certainly has to be preceded by liberation – not only by the removal of constraints but also from the necessities of life, liberation does not guarantee the status of freedom. Arendt says, “Freedom needed, in addition to mere liberation, the company of other men who were in the same state, and in it needed a common public space to meet them [...]”¹¹

Christopher Taylor characterizes a not dissimilar British renunciation of responsibility towards the people of the West Indies in the name of Freedom in the wake of British Liberalism as neglect. Although this leaves him open to the charge of paternalism (he admits that this is a description most befitting a parent), he employs it specifically because

Etymologically, neglect connotes the activity of not reading, of not gathering together, and (in a maximal philosophical sense) of not gathering something into a given *logos*. Liberalization constituted West Indians as empire’s negligible subjects – they could neither compel British attention through the citation of political *logos* nor gesture to the economic value of the islands.¹²

Taylor is a lot more clearly morally condemnatory of neglect (and relatively unconcerned with the uniqueness of every individual as the rationale for inclusion in a political *logos*) than Arendt; his book provides a clear causal account of structural change brought about primarily by the self-interestedness of an empire than he believes intentionally never concerned itself with the interests of its subjects.¹³

In her discussion of Imperialism, Arendt instead pities those who were responsible for imperial expansion. She sees their project as at first being a reaction to their own superfluosity (their exclusion from the public realm), then one of self-delusion (which removes the ability to engage in the philosophical activity of description), and finally one of a pessimistic renunciation

¹⁰ OT, p297, emphasis mine.

¹¹ “What is Freedom?” in BPF, p147.

¹² *Empire of Neglect* (2018), p5-6.

¹³ “the institutions constructed to translate anti-imperial intentions into worldly action were themselves constitutively indifferent to the sovereignty of moral intention.” *ibid.*, p4.

of agency (abiding by received description and doing whatever the judgement associated with it entails) that in the German case eventually manifests as the perverse selflessness of totalitarianism.

“The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” in OT opens with the language of disaster gaining momentum and uses repetition of “no”¹⁴ and “less”¹⁵ to emphasize the direness of the situation and to highlight the absence of the “space of appearance”. This first paragraph of the chapter emphatically describes the world being a bystander to the ruin of many of its own men.

She goes on to explain that to justify being a bystander, it accepts the misrepresentation of “worldliness” as sheer cynicism. It is this misrepresentation that she credits in part for the rise of the Nazis, who successfully composed a self-fulfilling prophecy of Jewish people as burdensome¹⁶ and of “cynical claims that no such thing as inalienable human rights existed and that affirmations of the democracies to the contrary were mere prejudice, hypocrisy, and cowardice in the face of the cruel majesty of the world” demonstrated by “the incredible plight of an ever-growing group of innocent people”.¹⁷

Arendt’s account of such misrepresentation emphasizes that she wants people to think for themselves – that is, to attempt to re-describe the worldly things that have been described by others, and to notice when what certain important words describe is wordlessly altered. It is these undescribed revisions that have unforeseen political consequences. “Metaphors and Tropes of speech” as Hobbes explains, “are less dangerous, because they profess their inconstancy; which the other do not.”¹⁸ This is why in Arendt’s work, we find examples of the political consequences of the imprecision of and disengagement from public descriptions. As Gadamer assigns himself the task of refining how understanding understands itself¹⁹, she undertakes the task of refining how description describes itself.

¹⁴ “nobody seems to be able to stop”, “no other war”, “no monetary crisis”, “[unemployment] no longer restricted to the working class”, “assimilated nowhere”, “Nothing which was being done, no matter how stupid, no matter how many people knew and foretold the consequences”, “a judgement that was passed neither by God nor by the devil”. (OT, p267)

¹⁵ “homeless”, “stateless”, “rightless”. (*ibid.*)

¹⁶ See footnote 2 of OT, “The Decline of Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man”.

¹⁷ OT, p269.

¹⁸ Hobbes, *op.cit.*, p31.

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), p279.