



Political Freedom

Human not Divine

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Abstract: Trevor Tchir explores Hannah Arendt's invocation of the *daimon*, the spirit of ancient Greek religion that possessed both divine and human characteristics and could sometimes confer special qualities on individuals that allowed them to perform feats that went beyond what would be expected of ordinary human abilities and fallibilities. Tchir suggests that in this move, Arendt betrays the insurmountable difficulty of accounting for the qualities she attributes to free human action. If only the image of divine intervention can explain how action rises to the heights that Arendt likes to celebrate, then perhaps combating the ills of modernity cannot do without the transcendental. Tchir's argument deserves careful consideration, but I am not persuaded that Arendt's religious images are anything more than metaphors for human abilities. Her account is better understood as a "this-worldly" phenomenology of human freedom..

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; freedom; political action; modernity; the self; natality; the *daimon*; individuality.

Trevor Tchir's book on Hannah Arendt's concept of action is full of provocative arguments and interpretations, and it offers nourishing food for thought, for which one should be very grateful.¹ Tchir focuses on Arendt's theory of the authentic political actor: the newcomer who seemingly appears out of nowhere and says or does something surprising that suggests new possibilities for political life. Arendt orients one to an aspect of politics that is all too easily overlooked, namely its creative dimension. Whatever political actors are trying to achieve, and regardless of whether they succeed or fail, the matter of how they go about trying to achieve it also needs to be considered. In

this way, the actor exhibits his or her personality. Action reveals not only what the actor is doing—namely reflecting upon beliefs and values, on how these apply to a given situation, and upholding a desire to bring about a certain result—but also what kind of person the actor is.

Arendt attributes great value to this self-disclosure. It is the supreme demonstration of individual uniqueness, one of Arendt's three central human conditions, together with nature and material culture. More importantly, it can make fully visible a distinctive kind of freedom: spontaneity, or action that is controlled neither by others nor by oneself, but which issues forth in an event that is both utterly unexpected—even for the actor—and yet meaningful and relevant for political action. In politics, the most

¹ Trevor Tchir, *Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Action: Daimonic Disclosure of the 'Who'*, Cham, CH: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017. [Henceforth cited as *TPA*]

significant instances for such events will be words or deeds that awaken people to aspects of the world that have hitherto not been revealed. This encompasses world-disclosure as well as self-disclosure.

Arendt's elevation of the dignity of the political is a perspective scholars have always found striking and, very often, implausible. But Tchir notices something in Arendt that seems to enhance the value of the political, beyond what even her most sympathetic readers have found so far. He points out that in trying to explain the significance of political action, Arendt resorts to religious imagery. Given her commitment to secularism, Tchir's interpretation comes across as odd. Arendt's readers have commonly assumed that these images are metaphors, and Tchir does not disagree with this assumption, but he adds that they are not mere metaphors.

After all, the Athenian *polis* was protected by a goddess, and its citizens are known to have put to death those whom they believed had failed to show proper respect for her. In appropriating ancient Greek concepts of heroic action, Arendt could not help introducing their spirituality as well, above all the *daimon*, which enables mortal human beings to intuit the qualities of the gods. Surely only a spiritual force could bring about miraculous action and exhibit the kind of glory that overwhelms one when contemplating great deeds. The hero brings meaning into the world from the realm of transcendent value and thus achieves a quasi-divine status.

But I still think that a more secular reading is required to capture Arendt's intentions. My point of departure is her identification of politics with the performing arts. Arendt is offering an expressive, rhetorical picture of politics. It is the art of drama and not the divinity of the *daimon* that allows one to take at least the first steps toward her understanding of free political action as an expressive and creative activity.

One can enter into the expressive dimension of politics only if one approaches it the way a drama critic approaches the theater, appreciating not only the character's motives and aims but also something more nebulous—something that Kenneth Burke called the "attitude," the state of mind, the deep meanings in terms of fundamental human concerns that are at stake for the character and for those touched by his actions. The *daimon*, I think, is a theatrical effect—which does not mean, of course, that it is inauthentic or unreal at all.

It is also a metaphor for an ironic, and perhaps

even tragic, feature of action. The self that one discloses to others is different from one's self-perception, or from how one wants to be regarded by others, and yet a great deal is at stake, for how one is perceived by others does determine one's fate. A central feature of the *daimon* is its ambiguity: it is "variously understood as the genius, voice of conscience, guardian, and birth attendant that accompanies mortals through life" (TPA 6). That sounds a lot like the fickle public, for whom one day a political actor may appear to be a saint and the next day a sinner; sometimes someone to attack and sometimes someone worth defending.

For Tchir, the *daimon* lifts the political actor out of the world of ordinary motives and aims, which are held not to operate in authentic political action. Such action "makes the public realm a spiritual realm" where "transcendent Being may be disclosed" (TPA 119). From Martin Heidegger's concept of unconcealment, Arendt is said to have borrowed the idea that political action is not willed, that is, not deliberative. Tchir argues that Arendt repudiates "discursive rationality," for otherwise action could not initiate radically new and unexpected things—as only divine inspiration could explain that (TPA 104). But the idea that creative political action requires one to exclude considerations of the actor's motives and aims I find difficult to accept. The self that is disclosed in action consists precisely of beliefs, judgments, and aims, and it is not clear how a person's acts could be at all intelligible if one could not appeal to a person's intentions in at least a broad contextual sense. It is more coherent to understand Arendt as contending that understanding political action in terms of judgments and aims is not sufficient for understanding the self-disclosure dimension of action, which, as with any fictional drama, demands attention to character, style, and that nebulous "meaning." A similar point applies to the creative dimension of Arendtian freedom. It is not that the actor is not pursuing a definite goal informed by familiar beliefs and desires, it is rather that the result of this pursuit is something unfamiliar and unexpected.

If motives and aims are an unavoidable part of understanding action, then there must be a deliberative component of political action as well as a spontaneous aspect. If, however, the *daimonic* theory is right, the two components come apart, and we either have ordinary, inauthentic, human, all-too-human action or divinely inspired, glorious deeds. One advantage of this view is that it is indeed difficult to see how spontaneity and

deliberation do go together.

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the self can provide a solution to this dilemma. Nietzsche, too, valued spontaneity, which he called "instinct," but he also valued deliberation, at least to the extent that it was free from the constraints of the "ascetic ideal" and was devoted instead to free-spirited self-fashioning. An instinct, for Nietzsche, is a desire for some object that a person acts on without consciously deliberating over whether the object is desirable.² A person is a hierarchy of drives in the sense that some drives "command" other drives.³ However, as Nietzsche sees it, the fact that some drives "command" does not mean that they are stronger than other drives in a physical sense; it means that they are authoritative. The authoritative drives are identical with what is called a person's "values" or "principles": the "good" desires, namely those one identifies with, oppose one's "evil" desires. But how do some drives acquire authority over others? This occurs through deliberative, willed self-fashioning that establishes the dispositions that later on, in other contexts, will operate instinctively. Spontaneity and deliberation come together over the course of an individual life, but deliberation need not occur at the moment of action, even though it is a condition of one's ability to act.

Yet this picture does not quite capture the kind of freedom that Arendt is describing. It suggests that being spontaneous equates to merely doing something undeliberately, but as expected. Arendt's idea of spontaneity is different. For her, it refers to doing something that makes sense under the given circumstances, but is new and surprising even for the respective actor. To surprise oneself by expressing a new idea or angle in a conversation, for example, one has to know one's way around the subject well enough to explore it without conscious effort, but this is not at all like doing something by rote. It is not a matter of consciously planning to express an idea, and one does not express it for habitual reasons either; it just comes to mind and it works: it proves to be the right idea at the right time.

There is indeed something mysterious here, because it is as if something is being created out of

nothing, that is, one is being confronted with the ultimate divine power. But for all that, there is nothing supernatural about it; such mental sparks happen all the time. It is as if something is passing through one's mind without being in charge of it, and yet, nevertheless, no one else could have acted exactly in this way. Extraordinary, yes—but calling it divine does not explain it. Instead, it merely characterizes it.

In one respect, the Arendt of Tchir's interpretation is not at all unfamiliar. This is the Arendt who is profoundly disappointed with modernity. God is dead, the transcendent goes unacknowledged, and meaning is nowhere to be found. The normalizing discourses of public and private enterprise have reduced humans to mere consumers who aspire to nothing higher than comfort and security. The unfortunate denizens of the modern world can do no better than measure out their lives in coffee spoons and, unlike for T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, they are proud of themselves. They have become social insects, performing assigned tasks automatically and thoughtlessly. A world such as this cannot accommodate loftier and nobler aspirations. It is not a fit home for humans.

Tchir seems to endorse Arendt's gloomy view of modernity. Arendtian political action matters, he says, for "the spaces for meaningful citizen engagement and responsive critique of the normalizing discourses of governments and corporations [are] under continuous threat" (*TPA* 4). Arendt's concept of action alerts one to the nature of this threat, namely that it narrows the range of possible actions, in contrast to the richer opportunities that can emerge in a freer and more pluralistic public sphere. Arendt argues that plurality is not a problem to be overcome but a basic condition of freedom and individuation that must be cared for and sheltered.

I do not believe that "normalizing discourse" is the main political challenge of the modern world, but let that pass. I do worry that Arendt over-valued the connection between creative self-disclosure and the existence of an authentic public sphere. Political action is only one form of creative freedom. It affords the opportunity to reveal oneself as a politically creative individual, but the public sphere is certainly not "the only place" where individuals can show who they "really and inexchangeably" are (*TPA* 33). For there is also everyday life, which reveals different sorts of qualities, from the ones revealed in the political sphere, many of which are in tension with the demands of politics. Humans reveal themselves and their creative abilities to one another in

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Four Great Errors," §2, in his *Twilight of the Idols*, transl. Richard Polt, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Vintage Books Edition 1989, §19.

a great many contexts, including friendship, marriage, parenthood, work, and art. There is no single forum that is fully adequate to express everything one has to express, and there is much about a person that can only be expressed intimately, if at all.

Moreover, Arendt understood that the Athenian public sphere that she imagined not only does not exist now but cannot exist.⁴ The ancient Greek *polis* required authority, and authority is in short supply in the modern world. It is also in tension with modern moral pluralism, which is very different from Arendt's plurality of individuals. In the ancient Greek *polis*, individuals could stand out in terms of how they did things and who they were only because what they were and what they were expected to live for was beyond question.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age" and "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1963.

This is why Arendt was right to turn toward the civic republican tradition, which understands political action as the care of our political institutions. She reminds her readers that not all forms of "speaking, questioning, and affirming new possibilities" that contest "dominant discourses" and "existing law" are valuable—only those carried out in an authentic spirit of civic virtue (*TPA* 237). She helps them see that in a liberal democratic society that is divided in terms of identities, values, and interests, the concern that ought to unite citizens is the health of shared institutions, for it is in these institutions that they meet to establish the terms on which to live together. I suspect that the world needs Arendt's counsel on such matters more urgently than it needs her theories of politics as a forum for individual expression, however philosophically stimulating they are.