

***Hannah Arendt:  
What A Twentieth Century Jewish Woman Philosopher  
Teaches Us About Politics Today  
By Margaret Betz, Ph.D.***

December 4<sup>th</sup> 2010 marked the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Hannah Arendt. Her name unfortunately remains unfamiliar to most Americans today outside of academic circles. Even within academic circles, Arendt's name is unfamiliar to many in the field of her training – philosophy. Arendt herself bears some of the responsibility for this reality due to her self-chosen exile from the “circle of philosophers” in favor of the title “political thinker.” In truth, this exile was primarily in name only, for Arendt surely continued to write philosophy. Her self-proclaimed “exile” was her attempt to disengage herself from philosophy's intellectual tradition of remaining neutral in politically troubled times and its tendency of dealing with “Man” and not people in their plurality. Arendt's phenomenological philosophy became a model of a commitment to philosophical plurality.

Hannah Arendt was by all accounts a complicated personality: Despite being forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1933 because she was a Jew, Arendt maintained a lifelong friendship with her mentor, Martin Heidegger, who infamously embraced Nazism, referring to the “inner truth and greatness of this movement.” Although dedicated to ensuring her Jewish heritage inform her political writing, she nonetheless angered Jewish groups by not always supporting their perspective. Furthermore, Arendt and as the first woman to earn the rank of full professor at Princeton in 1959 (even before the university opened itself to female students), Arendt surprisingly bristled at any attempt to officially recognize her accomplishment, earning her the label of the “antifeminist” by some feminist thinkers. As it turns out, her sometimes atypical behavior proved in the end to be a dedication to a life of individuality and uniqueness.

As a refuge, Arendt eventually came to America and taught at various universities like the University of Chicago and the New School. She inherited a reverence for ancient Greek philosophy from Heidegger that carried over into a deep respect for Greek political life, which was surely fueled by her personal experience with its opposite, totalitarianism. In *The Human Condition* Arendt argues that in the ancient Greek polis, political action was a privilege, seen as the pinnacle of human existence. It was considered a “second life” where individuals were able to escape the burdens of labor and express through words and actions who they uniquely are. As Arendt noted, political action is dependent on plurality and interaction - literally the “inter-est...that ties people and bounds them together.”

Arendt's political philosophy is thoroughly saturated with her phenomenological training. Her description of political action, for instance, is that it offers the opportunity for each to convey his or her *doxa*, one's own unique perspective. Arendt refers to it as how “it appears to me.” She describes the polis as the “simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives.” Citizens confront each other in the public space, presenting their different

perspectives, “modifying their view, and enlarging their standpoint to incorporate that of others,” as Maurizio D’Entreves, an Arendtian scholar, explains.

For a thinker so focused on the political upheaval of her day and so defined by her times, it seems unlikely that Arendt would be politically relevant in 2010. Yet we can still learn a lesson from Arendt’s description of Greek political action, especially considering it is a model for our own democracy. Arendt’s explanation of *doxa* as inherent to the plurality of people in the public sphere speaks to the damage being done to our current political life.

Arendt claimed there is truth to each individual’s *doxa*, one’s “own opening to the world.” She argues while the world “opens up differently to every man according to his position in it,” the same world opens up to everyone despite our differences. Standing before a tree, for example, we all might have different perspectives on it, all equally true, but we are still able to agree to the existence and presence of the tree. To explain this point, Arendt offered Heidegger’s concept of worldliness, the “in between” individuals that simultaneously separates and holds us together. Arendt adds the twist that common sense comes about when each individual looks upon the world, develops a unique “it appears to me” and, in combination with others, acknowledges the sameness within all these diverse points of view.

This is not to say that one’s *doxa* cannot be improved according to Arendt; indeed, she believed each has a responsibility to do so. If democracy is rule by the people, we each have an obligation to ourselves and each other to be informed and conscientious in order to best self-govern. Arendt was a firm proponent of the belief that as sharers of the common world we are all equally responsible for it.

Here is where we have faltered. We have lost sight of the fact that opinion still needs to be factually based, informed, and exposed to other opinions at the risk of being mere fantasy. It is the difference between each of us describing how the tree “appears to me” and one of us denying outright the tree exists at all. That is not opinion, according to Arendt, and that is how our current political climate often operates. People of differing ages, backgrounds, genders, religious and ethnic heritages add a new dimension to each topic – their own “it appears to me” - but not at the expense of what is verifiably and factually true.

Unfortunately, we have forgotten in recent years that this is the part of political discourse that is not up for debate – staying tethered to the truth. Rumors that Obama is Muslim (Rush Limbaugh regularly refers to him as “Imam Obama) or a mosque is being built at Ground Zero (actually, a proposed community center with a prayer room two and a half blocks away) show that even lowly “opinion” needs be grounded to a factual center point else it whip out of control like a hose on full-blast. All discussion, all interaction, is forced to cease if we cannot agree to the common (factual) world we inhabit. Sincere factually-based disagreement on policy and even scientific findings invite further

discussion. But simple denial by some, based on nothing more than a refusal to acknowledge facts, halts further discussion and is therefore politically irresponsible.

American financier Bernard Baruch said in the 1940s, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion but not to his own facts.” This is too frequently disregarded in the current political debate only to diminish the conversation for us all. This phenomenon has sparked the coinage of a new term regarding our president: Obama Derangement Syndrome. To fail to admit the factual truth of the world “in between” us means all dialogue breaks down and throws each of us back into our own isolation.

Arendt herself was neither liberal nor conservative, never neatly falling under either category; instead her complexity fulfilled her admiration of the “it appears to me” of *doxa* inherent to political action. Arendt’s political philosophy serves as a warning to us today: we may disagree on policy and ideology, but we may not stifle political discussion entirely by denying facts. Our democracy depends on it.

**Margaret Betz** teaches philosophy at local Philadelphia universities and is the author of the book *The Hidden Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*