

Reflexivity between the Modern Society Concepts of Equality and Plurality: Their Transformation according to Arendt

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In her book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt states: “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anybody else” (1998, 8). In this statement, we are the same (equality) and yet nobody is ever the same as anybody else (plurality). This may sound contradictory yet what it means is that there is a common base which makes us all the same, and precisely because of this base, we are able to make comparisons and hence differentiate one from the other because we are all different. When analyzing two concepts, an equal status in at least one normatively relevant respect is needed. Where there is one, there is the other precisely because of the other and vice versa. The fact that it is only at least one respect that is needed implies the existence of other aspects that act as common distinguishing factors. Therefore, distinction implies equality. The paper will explore how according to Arendt, equality, a political concept, has been perverted into a social concept. In her view, previously, differing circumstances and conditions served as “protection” and actually had a protective role. An explanation will thus be given as to how a lack of these differences in the modern period has resulted in a challenge and how this challenge has created unexpected problems for the human condition. This implies reflexivity between political theory and the human agent, and will be presented from Arendt’s perspective.

Keywords: equality, plurality, reflexivity

In this paper, reflexivity is considered between the two concepts of plurality and equality from an Arendtian perspective. Both concepts for her are of a political origin.

For Hannah Arendt, plurality is due to “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 1998, 7). Her emphasis here is on the fact that men are different and should not be classified as simply man as if he were the result of multiplication (7). Much as men are all the same, they are different from each other and one will never be another, not now nor in the future (8). Precisely because men share a common nature, which as shall be seen is, what she means by saying, “men are all the same,” can there be any point for comparison. Differences are identified with comparison, thus implying common aspects. The aspect of reflexivity therefore comes into play from the very beginning since to be different one also has to be the same meaning that we are all the same without in actual fact being the same.

Plurality therefore refers to both *equality* and *distinction*. Equality here refers to the fact that all human beings belong to the same species sufficiently alike to understand one another. Distinction on the other hand refers to the fact that no two of them are ever interchangeable, since each of them is an individual endowed

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with a unique biography and perspective of the world. We are individual and unique because “nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live” (1998, 7). This means that we each have a unique identity that is unrepeatably, each having a different combination of individual differences which are accidental and are predicated of each human being.

Arendt says plurality is a condition for political life. To understand this, it is necessary to first understand what she means by a political life. In this, she takes an Aristotelian¹ perspective and separates the public sphere from the private sphere. In the public sphere, you have the experience of the *polis* in which action and speech are fundamental. They are fundamental because it is through our action and speech that our unique distinctness is revealed. Together, action and speech constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs (Arendt 1998, 95) and it is through them that individual differences are manifested and made apparent.

In order to manifest these differences, a political space is necessary where one meets together with peers. Men strive to distinguish themselves from their peers in the public sphere. They need to be able to show through unique deeds or achievements who they are as individuals. Arendt clarifies that to distinguish oneself is not to isolate oneself. Isolation, which she differentiates from loneliness² and solitude, affects the political realm of life because one is denied the capacity to show that one is different from the others or that one is an individual. It is true that men need to feel that they form part of the world and that they belong to it. However, much as he needs to form part of it and be accepted by it, he also needs to be able to add to it as an individual by making his contribution which is unique and that only he can make. In order for this to happen, men need to be able to act in the public realm.³ Arendt explains this when she writes the chapter entitled “Ideology and Terror” (Arendt 1998).

In *The Human Condition*, the same idea prevails from the very first chapters. There she says that our feelings for reality depend upon appearance and the existence of a public realm where men express and distinguish themselves among their peers. She goes on to say that even that which is intimate and private can be transformed into a shape to fit them for public appearance. Either way, a public space is necessary hence the political realm. In fact, for Arendt, the concept of plurality is not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life (Arendt 1998, 7) for without it, men would not be who they are.

What is noteworthy is that, despite plurality itself, Arendt never loses sight of the fact that much as one may belong to a class, nation, or group of people, one is still an individual. For her, the individual always needs to be addressed in his specific existence (Arendt 1994, 46) without which he would not be an individual. By his specific existence is meant his own culture and his own individual history all of which result in experiences that are peculiar and are both vital and necessary in order to understand him. In fact, Arendt’s belief that being an individual is very much a part of being human is so strong that she claims that even events of a concentration camp were not able to completely eradicate the individual as such (Arendt, “Mankind and Terror,” 1994, 304).

The idea that much as we are human we are also individuals is related to her existentialist ideas that are characteristic of Arendt. Nevertheless, she never goes to the extreme of existentialism. Meaning she is not a radical existentialist who only sees man, the individual and thereby places him at the centre making him the sole and only reference or point of departure for her reasoning. Rather, there is the reflexive reasoning that she holds in which man is a man but among men. This highlights the importance of the others which in turn highlights plurality. This in itself implies reflexivity between man as a political being and man as an individual.

She explains how totalitarian movements, aimed at eliminating the individual, something which as has been seen, to her, goes against the true human condition. She describes how the totalitarian systems aimed at

forming the European mass man,⁴ as Arendt named him.⁵ By this system, one stopped being an individual to such an extent that all what the adherents really cared about was their status as a member of the movement⁶ as if this is what really defined who they were. A similar system was used with the Jews who were all classed together with no distinction whatsoever. She describes a “monstrous equality without fraternity or humanity”⁷ in her article entitled, “The Image of Hell” (Arendt 1994, 198). To want to be totally identified with a group and not to want to distinguish oneself would therefore mean not to want to be oneself.

In all her descriptions of equality, there is a constant interplay between being equal and unequal which is characteristic of her concept of plurality. She highlights different kinds of equality.

She describes a “false” kind of equality that is necessarily fostered by totalitarian regimes for them to be effective. Under such regimes, men are not recognized for who and what they are. Rather, men are reduced to seemingly nothing. This *nothing*, however, is not a factor of equality. Instead, Arendt refers to it as “primal equality.” However as we saw at the beginning, the term equality signifies a relationship between two elements which must have the same quality in at least one respect. Distinguishing factors are therefore important meaning that equality denotes a relation between the objects that are compared. The problem is that, in the case of the Jews in the times of the Third Reich, there was no relation and therefore there could be no equality in the strict sense hence her reference to primal equality. In this kind of primal equality, people were made to believe that the only thing they all had in common with the others was their potential death and that much as they were all different, in this they were equal.

Thus, people were reduced to potential corpses and were made to believe that it was principally because of this *nothingness* that they were “equal.” Her argument against this was an ontological explanation in which she raised the fact of our “common human nature” and “a common human purpose” as well as “a common human origin” being the true cause of our equality (Arendt 1998, 234). It is in these different common aspects that men are equal; otherwise, it is a false equality.

What she discusses more widely is equality on a political level. Like the ancients, she separates the public sphere from the private sphere as has been seen. Of interest is how she relates the public sphere to equality claiming that the public sphere is largely based on the law of equality (Arendt 1998, 301) to such an extent that, “we become equal as members of a group.” This means that without the members or individuals, there would be no group and consequently no equality.

For her, “the equality attending the public realm is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being ‘equalised’ in certain respects and for specific purposes. As such, the equalizing factor arises not from human ‘nature’ but from outside” (Arendt 1994, 215). By this she presumes and further explains that there is an equality among the participants (unequals) from the very beginning—though not from nature—and that they are in need of being “equalized.” This occurs when they enter into the public realm which is where they actually attain political equality.

In the public realm, one participant views the other as an equal until they distinguish themselves. The relationship between the participants is that of peers all of who have a right to step into the public sphere to be seen and heard and therefore be deindividualized (Arendt 1994, 50). For her, it is the public realm that gathers men together and relates them to each other (55). In the public realm, in other words, you have an equality of unequals in need of being equalized. This is also reflexive because they are equals and yet unequals.

Arendt distinguishes between political equality and social equality though her description of social equality is not as clear as her description of political equality. To begin with, her description of a society is that

it “always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest”(Arendt 1994, 39). In that sense, the members are equal and she explains that in ancient times, this one opinion or interest was usually represented by the head of the household in the public sphere (39).

In the modern period, Arendt talks about human organization and how this is only possible if it is guided by the principle of justice (Arendt 1998, 301) meaning that equality is related to justice and has very little to do with equality of the political realm as was the case in antiquity. Thus, it is the aspect of justice that is reflexive with political equality in modern times. And yet, to her, equality, “far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom” (Arendt 1994, 32-33) since “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” (32-33). Equality therefore ought to be as it was in antiquity which is freedom from inequality in rulership and therefore to be able to move in a sphere amongst equals yet as individuals.

Today, she explains, equality is only possible if human organization is based on the principle of justice because “we are not born equal but become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decisions to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights”(Arendt 1998, 301).

As seen above, human organization implies the presence of others (plurality) who are different but in need of equality. They then become equal as members of a group given that the order is based on principles of justice. In other words, if there is justice, there is equality. Equality in this case is therefore the result of human organization. This assumption according to Arendt is only valid “because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals” (Arendt 1998, 301). There is a lot that is said in this phrase but attention shall only be drawn to her emphasis being placed on man acting “together with his equals” because this takes us back to plurality and therefore to reflexivity. What the phrase implies is that much as they are equals, it is still men who act and men act differently. This makes the others a reference for equality.

Reflexively, much as men are all human and equal as humans, they are still individuals and therefore different and consequently unequal. What she refers to as unequal are the differences that are due to one’s natural origin, different organization, and fate in history (Arendt 1998, 234). She claims that the differences of our unchangeable and unique nature break into the political scene because these differences remind us of the limitations of human activity which she says are identical with the limitations of human equality.⁸ Humans are different by nature but Arendt claims above that it is these very differences that highly developed political communities hope to eliminate when they foster ethnic homogeneity which in turn only reminds one of the always present differences and differentiations. Reminders of these differences which are ever present and cannot change are what result in what she terms “dumb hatred, mistrust, and discrimination” (234).

The reflexive interplay of natural differences vs. ethnic homogeneity is precisely the tension that exists between unchangeable differences. This is because natural differences are unchangeable and therefore ethnic homogeneity is not possible. Of late, men have tried to get rid of natural differences going as far as to think of a global nation, something which Arendt has never believed possible. Rather, she has always spoken against political unity at a global level as being possible. This can be seen in her correspondences with Karl Jaspers. She refers to ethnic homogeneity as another great challenge of the modern period in which man for the first time is confronted without the protection of differing circumstances and conditions (Arendt 1998, 54). The result of this she claims is a new concept of equality in which people are equal based on similar circumstances and conditions. This false homogeneity is what she refers to as a perversion of equality from a political into a

social concept (54). It is false because natural differences are unchangeable and therefore only stand out more when one tries to conceal or suppress them.

And the sameness is far from being uniformity; just as man and woman can be the same, namely human, only by being absolutely different from each other, so the national of every country can enter this world history of humanity only by remaining and clinging stubbornly to what he is (Arendt 1955, 89).

Political concepts should therefore not be perverted into social concepts since political concepts are based on plurality, diversity, and mutual limitations as opposed to homogeneity and sameness. This plurality is reflexive with equality but equality is not sameness. Rather, it is plurality and equality that influence one another in a reflexive manner. Arendt herself says that politics deals with men, nationals of many countries, and heirs to many pasts (Arendt 1955, 81) thereby implying both equality and distinction.

What Arendt warns against is the intent at ethnic homogeneity or put differently, the attempt at homogeneity despite of the differences that are natural and always present. Human limitations exist because of a nature that cannot be changed and are beyond the power of man. Much as elimination may be apparently successful as was the case in Nazi Germany, we must not forget that these differences are real and that they are unchangeable since they are also natural. Instead, they become more conspicuous. There will always be an inequality despite of our equality as humans. Instead, these differences are a richness that also have a protective role and ought to be recognized as such.

Notes

1. According to Aristotle, of all activities, action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*) constitute the *bios politikos*. Both he considered to be coeval and coequal and necessary for public life.

2. According to her, loneliness affects human life as a whole as it is the loss of oneself. Solitude requires being alone but does not necessarily result in one losing contact with the world. One can be isolated without being lonely and solitude can result in loneliness. To be isolated is a situation in which one cannot act since no one else will act with you.

3. Arendt claims that "Whether an act is performed in private or in public is by no means a matter of indifference." Arendt, 1958, *The Human Condition*.

4. Refer to the chapter on "A Classless Society" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 315.

5. She gives a full description of this process when she explains the totalitarian ideology.

6. Ibid.

7. More about this monstrous equality will be discussed later.

8. "... the background formed by our unchangeable and unique nature, breaks into the political scene as the alien which in its all too obvious difference reminds us of the limitations of human activity—which are identical with the limitations of human equality. The reason why highly developed political communities, such as the ancient city states or modern nation-states, so often insist on ethnic homogeneity is that they hope to eliminate as far as possible those natural and always present differences and differentiations which by themselves arouse dumb hatred, mistrust, and discrimination because they indicate all too clearly those spheres where men cannot act and change at will, i.e., the limitations of the human artifice" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951, 301).

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