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Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world

Borren, M.

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Introduction to Part II

The common world, community and the citizen

In Part II, I will explore the aspect of the commonness of the world, that is, the relationship between the individual, community and world. 'Community' is a question rather than an answer for Arendt. Arendt's starting point differs considerably from many other political philosophers investigating the problem of community who are worried about society's disintegration or fragmentation. Arendt, on the contrary, is worried about the social tendency towards and the coercion into homogenization or fusion. Arendt's philosophical readers have largely ignored the fact that her reflections on political community are rooted in her analysis of the totalitarian experience. The national-socialist ideology of *Blut und Boden* generated in her a deep distrust of ethnic or otherwise natural foundations and justifications of community and made her favor artificial citizenship instead. Additionally, Arendt's account of totalitarianism led her to identify two totalitarian, anti-political predicaments: first, the condition of all encompassing isolation, which finds its expression in the experience of superfluousness and loneliness, 'this desert of neighborlessness and loneliness'¹; and second, the fusion of plural men into single Man, through the 'iron band' of ideology.²

The totalitarian experience taught Arendt that people need both temporary solitude, and a shared worldly space or being-together. Solitude is the necessary precondition of thinking. This temporary withdrawal from the world in which one is together with oneself, is required for thinking, since thinking in Arendt's view consists in the dialogue between me and myself, or what she frequently calls the two-in-one of the thinking person. However, we need others to call us back to the world and to become one individual, the appearing who, again.³

In solitude, we are always two-in-one; we become one whole individual, in the richness as well as the limitations of definite characteristics, through and only

¹ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 334, 348.

² See chapter 2.

³ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 358-40.

through the company of others. For our individuality, in so far as it is one - unchangeable and unmistakable - we depend entirely on other people.⁴

I previously called this the paradox of belonging and withdrawal.⁵ Philosophers, because of their experience in solitude, possess 'extraordinary insight into all those relationships which cannot be realized without this being alone with one's own self'.⁶ However, they tend to forget the equal importance of being-together, the 'relationships between men and the realm they constitute, springing simply from the fact of human plurality'.⁷

Solitude is not at all the same as loneliness, first, because '[i]n solitude we are never alone, but are together with ourselves'⁸, and second, as long as one is not separated from others, in solitude one is also 'potentially together with everybody'.⁹ This potential being-together-with-everybody is what Arendt calls the 'enlarged mentality' (*erweiterte Denkungsart*) which is the condition of representative thinking, understanding and judgment.¹⁰ Solitude only turns into loneliness or isolation 'if through some physical or some political accident we are robbed of company or companionship'¹¹. This might happen on an incidental basis, but it becomes a collective human situation under totalitarian conditions, in the experience of superfluosity. 'Loneliness develops when man does not find companionship to save him from the dual nature of his solitude, or when man as an individual, in constant need of others for his individuality, is deserted or separated from others. In the latter case he is all alone, forsaken even by the company of himself.'¹² In other words, solitude turns into the pathological condition of isolation when people become distinct without being together; being-together turns into fusion, when people are together without being distinct. Both happen under totalitarian conditions, because they gave rise to the experiences of superfluosity and living in an iron band. Also, modern mass society offers examples of the paradox of fusion and isolation, in this case through the phenomena of conformism and subjectivism. By conformism, Arendt means the herd-like collection of people 'behav[ing] as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor.'¹³

Arendt's acknowledgment of the paradox of isolation and fusion led her to identify,

⁴ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 358.

⁵ See chapter 1.

⁶ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 360.

⁷ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 360.

⁸ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 358.

⁹ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 359.

¹⁰ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU. Cf. chapter 1.

¹¹ 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 359.

¹² 'On the nature of totalitarianism', EU, 359.

¹³ HC, 58.

Introduction to Part III

reversely, the paradox of being-together and solitude, since solitude and being-together appear to condition each other mutually. Also, it led her to acknowledge the paradox of difference and commonality and the paradox of communication and conflict.¹⁴ The paradox of difference and commonality demonstrates that the existence of different individual perspectives does not jeopardize community. Only when it's the point of reference of a plurality of perspectives does the world obtain the feature of commonality. Reversely, unity in the sense of uniformity, unanimity or sameness, threatens the world's commonality. Therefore, Arendt rejects both traditional communitarian or foundationalist answers to the question of community and radical individualist responses.¹⁵ Due to the paradoxes of plurality, the individual and the common world are not antithetical. Truly political community, that is, non-given, artificial and heterogeneous community, emerges whenever citizens publicly display their plurality of views and opinions. Its purpose is not to achieve agreement, consensus or harmony by homogenizing or equalizing differences, but to do justice to the multiplicity and divergence of individual views, in order to establish a common world. These views need not concur. If everyone would think and feel the same, we indeed would not need communication at all. Indeed, conflict and communication constitute a paradox.

Community for Arendt is never a given, that is, it lacks an ultimate foundation. But what, then, do people as citizens have in the common, positively defined? How do they build a common world if there is no foundation? Arendt points out a number of activities, practices and conditions that shape our relation to the common world: exchanging opinions and making promises (chapter 3), common sense (chapter 4) and civic friendship (chapter 5).

¹⁴ See chapter 2.

¹⁵ For a similar critique of the concept of community, see Young, 1989.

