Arendtian Understanding and Feminism

AOIFE MCINERNEY

It is a long-standing criticism of Hannah Arendt that she does not address issues of gender inequality in her work. This failure has been attributed, for one, to the "masculine" tradition in which she was educated. Adrienne Rich famously described Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) as a "lofty and crippled book," an example of the "tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideology."[1] Arendt's uncritical theorising of political structures that historically exclude women from political participation has been identified as a flaw in her work, particularly for feminists.[2] Adrienne Rich claims that the very definition of feminism "implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy for us, the distortion, of male-created ideologies, and that we proceed to think, and act, out of that recognition" (Rich 1979, 249). In other words, attention must be paid to the political and social structures and ideologies which preclude or disadvantage one on the basis of sexual identity. Others find valuable resources in Arendt to think through issues of sexual difference and the exclusion of certain groups from politics based on identity, sexual orientation, race and class (Cavarero 1995; Kristeva 2001; Honkasalo 2014; Maslin 2013).[3] However, in spite of her exclusion of explicit gender-based oppression, Arendt's staunch rejection of conformism and attentiveness to the political relevance of experiences of alienation make her an unlikely ally for those who attempt to articulate and understand the diverse nature of political and social oppression.

Arendt's resourcefulness for such discussions stems from the fact that underpinning her work is the fundamental question concerning how one relates to the world; a world which simultaneously shapes and alienates us. Likewise, feminist thinkers begin by acknowledging that often, experiences of alienation stem from the realization that one's experiences and even identity are in some way formed by experiences of systematic oppression. As Sandra Lee Bartky has it, "To apprehend oneself as victim is to be aware of an alien and hostile force outside of oneself which is respon-

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sible for the blatantly unjust treatment of women and which enforces a stifling and oppressive sex-role differentiation" (Bartky 1990, 15). We are faced, it seems, with the challenge of having to live in a world in which we often do not recognize ourselves, in which there are forces that thwart individual actualization through the, often subtle, assumption of gender roles, economic oppression and even sexual self-objectification. While Arendt does not address the gendered nature of these structures explicitly, what she shares with feminist discourse is a deep recognition of the existential and political nature of oppression and alienation.

Here I clarify Arendt's concept of understanding and argue for its potential usefulness for feminist discourse. For Arendt, understanding is the "unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world" (Arendt 1994, 308). It is a world-orientated activity, a reflective act that is not totally bound to essentialist definitions of gender and identity (see Allen 1999, 102-106) and so is advantageous for feminists for it reduces the traditional prominence given to identity categories. Efforts for a unified theory of feminism generate considerable difficulties, to say the least (Ramazanoglu 1985). The advantage of an Arendtian understanding is that it is carried out in the absence of any traditional moral categories or normative standards. It seeks neither to eliminate the particular in the service of the universal nor does it fall into the trap of relativization.

Given this, I believe certain experiences which feminism aims to recognize overlap with Arendt's theory. I am not alone in this recognition. In "Feminism and the Abomination of Violence," Jacqueline Rose, for instance, utilizes Arendt's notion of thoughtlessness "as offering a new way of thinking about violence against women in our time" (Rose 2016, 7). The existentialist concern with a world which one is at once bound to, and alienated from, is given significant attention in her thought. There are aspects of our facticity that simultaneously place us and estrange us to the world, one of them being gender. As such, I discuss Arendt's concept of understanding in light of how it addresses experiences of alienation from the world while helping to overcome them. An Arendtian understanding means to reconcile oneself to the times in which one lives *without* having to accept them and, as such, aligns with the experiences and goals of feminist theory.

Mass Loneliness and Oppression

It was the phenomenon of totalitarianism which first stirred Arendt to truly reflect on the nature of understanding. In Lisa Disch's words, "The problem of understanding is to find a way to make a spontaneous but principled response to the phenomenon of total domination" (Disch 1993, 666). Understanding, Disch continues, does not rely on experiences of oppression which give people a privileged access to structures of domination (667). Arendt sought to dispel the many misconceptions she perceived about the essence of totalitarianism. These misconceptions, she held, are largely born out of a desire to ease our sense of discomfort. Faced with the unprecedented, knowledge is often obtained by analogy, that is, by comparison to something that has already happened and hence is already known. Such a method emphasises similarity at the expense of originality. But Arendt was adamant that "[t]otalitarian government is unprecedented because it defies comparison" (Arendt 1973, 461). What was new about totalitarianism was what she called "mass loneliness."

Mass loneliness differs from our conventional understanding of what it is to feel lonely. Loneliness is caused by the absence of company and a lack of companionship. Yet, this state is rectifiable for most, for the possibility to seek out others and form a connection ultimately remains. Mass loneliness, however, is different because it eradicates the common world; that is, the shared space between people, and so destroys the potential for human connection. The result is the alienation of large groups of people from the world and from one another. People do not feel they belong anywhere, because, essentially, there is nowhere to which they can belong. There exists no common space that, under normal circumstances, is established between people whenever and wherever they come together; it is the condition of meaninglessness. This absence of meaning should not be taken in the nihilistic sense, rather, we are robbed of meaning when we cease to live in a shared world. In this way, mass loneliness is detrimental to the survival of the world. Arendt's insight is that radical loneliness occurs even in the company of others at times when speech, action and self-actualization are suppressed.

One group who explicitly thematize this experience are feminists, although they are by no means the only ones. To think from a feminist standpoint, one must be aware that: i) one is treated differently due to one's gender or sex; ii) that such treatment is unjust, and; iii) be willing

to change these conditions in the goal of achieving gender equality. This awareness often co-exists with experiences of alienation where one is in tension with both oneself and the world. It is a form of altered world engagement where one is always alive to oppressive experiences and hurtful assumptions, where one is both agent and victim. It places them outside the usual, pre-reflective mode of living where one does not feel at odds with themselves and their environment. Instead, the true meaning of events, even the most mundane, becomes suspect. Reality is no longer an unmediated experience but has become deceptive and even painful. As Bartky puts it:

> "To apprehend myself as victim in a sexist society is to know that there are few places where I can hide, that I can be attacked almost anywhere, at any time, by virtually anyone [...] In short, these are revealed as instruments of oppression or as articulations of a sexist institution. Since many things are not what they seem to be, and since many apparently harmless sorts of things can suddenly exhibit a sinister dimension, social reality is revealed as *deceptive.*" (Bartky 1990, 17)

There is a tension with the world which sees them as inferior, as different, and, if they wish to change this perception, as difficult.

The feminist's experience of time is likewise altered. They are split between the current circumstances which alienate them and are projected towards a future reality in which these circumstances may be different. This temporal split is a central feature of feminist experience. In other words, "The very *meaning* of what the feminist apprehends is illuminated by the light of what ought to be" (Bartky 1990, 14). This experience marks an existential paradox for feminists as one is both alienated from the present and always, in some way, projected towards a future in which circumstances are different; a future in which experiences of oppression and alienation do not occur because the world, in this sense, is changed through action. This notion is reminiscent of Beauvoir's conception of transcendence. In her own terms: "Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects; it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future" (Beauvoir 2010, 37).

The danger for Arendt, then, is that one tries to console oneself by retreating from the world as the source of these difficult experiences, a retreating into immanence. Doing so means not only that the structures of oppression go unaddressed and that the world is ultimately unchanged, but it also means one never faces the reality of the situation for what it is. When reality becomes too much to bear, one is thrown either into the comfort of the past or a sense of optimism (or pessimism) about the future. But neither situation serves to better the world nor entails a reconciliation to things as they are now, a necessary step if one wishes to enact change.

The Discomfort of Understanding

The mass phenomena of loneliness and domination are moments in which one is in tension with the world and often with oneself. Only through understanding can one begin a process of reconciliation and eventual change. Reconciliation is not resignation; it does not mean acceptance of circumstances or limitations. Rather, reconciliation is a mode of living in a world which simultaneously relates and alienates us. Arendt's hermeneutic-phenomenological method posits the world as the meaningful context of shared human interests and interaction. The world is essentially plural, multifaceted and intersubjectively guaranteed. Unlike a robust empirical or rational theory of world, phenomenologists maintain our primary access to the world is through "lived experience." Lived experience signifies our pre-reflective understanding of phenomena. It is inherently meaningful, but this meaning is not always immediately clear to us.

Arendt was someone who remained uniquely aware of the differences in experiences and sought to preserve them as per her theory of action, plurality and natality. Given this, understanding is not an abstract endeavour but one bound to real-world experiences, as such, her approach is a phenomenological one. Her analyses remain bound to the lived experiences that inspire them and remain true to their worldly manifestation. Arendt was all too wary of the ways in which phenomena may be distorted by the various methods used to understand them. Her goal is to understand, rather than to know in an objectivist sense what something is.[4]

Arendt maintains that truly grasping the meaning of an experience or event entails reflective understanding, which is not the same as subsuming and categorising information. Hence, Arendtian understanding is not

a cognitive endeavour in a strict rationalistic sense. Invoking Kant, she makes a clear distinction between knowing and understanding, that is, between cognition and meaning (Arendt 2003, 163).[5] In other words, understanding is world-oriented, rather than strictly logical. Whereas logical operations proceed according to stringent principles of validity, and by which we arrive at conclusive results, Arendtian understanding is the continuous process through which we "try to be at home in the world." As a consequence of this, understanding never yields definitive conclusions. "Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results" (Arendt 1994, 307). Thus, while traditional epistemology prioritizes the method by which we come to know something, Arendtian understanding is closer to an existential mode of living. "It is the specifically human way of being alive; for every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a stranger, and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger" (308).

We can know what truth is but we must constantly rediscover and establish meaning. This latter task is done in the world and is achieved intersubjectively, rather than in the solitary capacity of logical reasoning. The world-directed nature of understanding means it is a perpetual activity which, from the perspective of knowing, is also futile. Yet, this apparent flaw is actually a strength. The world is ever-changing and continuously presents us with new experiences, new challenges and the different perspectives of others with whom we share and co-constitute the world. The co-constitution of the world is explained by Vasterling in the following:

> "A world must be built and maintained which is partly the work of homo faber, human beings who produce relatively permanent artefacts – from houses and cars to sewage systems, and from art and house decoration to books and movies – and who design and maintain the material (infra)-structure of the world. More important, however, in view of the (survival of the) political, is the immaterial or 'intangible' dimension of world, described by Arendt as the ephemeral and fragile 'web of human relationships', and the events, facts and states of affairs resulting from human action [...]" (Vasterling 2007, 250)

Arendt distinguished between the world, the human artifice and the natural world. Natural phenomena encompass the biological, empirical domain of the human species, whereas the world as human artifice is the intersubjectively socio-historical context in which human life unfolds. The human artifice produces a common world. The world is both the material and immaterial product of human activity (Vasterling 2007, 250). This means that "[i]f someone wants to see and experience the world as it 'really' is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and links them. Showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk *about* it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over and against one another" (Arendt 2005, 128). As such, our world constantly changes, and hence, understanding, in order to remain receptive to change, remains unfinished.

Understanding is what we refuse to do when we do not think for ourselves but rely on convention and dogma. Perhaps nothing is so appealing than the temptation to invoke the wisdom of tradition or the authority of science, especially when confronted with a new situation. But these actions inhibit our ability to respond meaningfully to events and experiences as "[...] they put to sleep our common sense, which is nothing else but our mental organ for perceiving, understanding, and dealing with reality and factuality" (Arendt 1972, 8). They anaesthetize people from reality, especially during moments when we are "denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt" (Arendt 1994, viii).[6] It is often the experiences that make us uncomfortable that require the most understanding and yet are the hardest to reflect on, of which Arendt was well aware.

Conclusion: Reconciliation and Feminism

Recognising the dimensions of alienation – be they through forms of oppression, loneliness or sexual difference – is a deeply uncomfortable and challenging experience for feminist thinkers, as Bartky points out. These experiences can never be known in the same way that we know an equation or a physical object because some things are not accessible through rationalistic means or empiricist methods. Whereas, Arendtian

understanding is the unending task by which we reconcile ourselves to the world in which injustice, violence, racism, sexism and all forms of oppression exist.[7] It entails being ready to comprehend reality as it is and face up to experiences as they are, no matter the difficulty, for only then have we right to hope that things may change. I believe, with some justification, that this facing up to reality, without having to accept it, is an essential experience of feminists. We are torn between an uncomfortable present and a hopeful future. While Arendt's work may noy directly speak of the feminist movement, this does not mean that her thought does not speak to it. It is the challenge to understand what we cannot know which unites Arendt and feminism. It is her insight into experiences and conditions of alienation that makes her useful for those who feel as though they do not belong, that convention has deemed them unconventional, and so, as outsiders.

Despite her more recent popularity, Arendt is largely seen as an outsider regarding the philosophical tradition. Yet, this is also her strength, for it enables her to address what tradition has neglected. Understanding as an act of reconciliation is crucial for those who seek to change the world. According to Arendt, solidarity based on oppression and exclusion is insufficient for change because it excludes the world in favour of the refuge of subjective experience. As a political movement, feminists sometimes struggle to find unifying experiences of oppression and, as a consequence, what political goals the movement should achieve, too, remains fragmentary and often in contention. The upshot of Arendtian understanding (and reconciliation) is the central importance of the world and not a reliance on traditional identity categories (Borren 2013, 198). However, in struggling with experiences of oppression, exclusion and alienation, the worldly structure of these phenomena tends to recede and, in its place, emphasis is often given to defining a one-size-fits-all definition of subjugation. The significance given to unifying definitions of oppression is done in the hope of establishing a common solidarity among victims and so make political change more effective. Yet this exclusive focus would be, in Arendt's eyes, to risk further alienation from the world. The task of reconciliation and the challenge of understanding means constantly reorienting ourselves to reality. I believe that only then can there be any hope for a better future; after all, it is not our experiences we wish to change but the world itself.

Notes

1 Adrienne Rich writes of her experience reading *The Human Condition*: "To read such a book, by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideologies [...] The power of male ideology to possess such a female mind, to disconnect it as it were from the female body which encloses it and which it encloses, is nowhere more striking than in Arendt's lofty and crippled book" (Rich 1979, 255). Mary O'Brien refers to Arendt as "a woman who accepts the normality and even the necessity of male supremacy" (O'Brien 1981, 99-100).

2 Hanna Pitkin criticizes Arendt's distinction between public and private space because of a normative gender implication: "Thus, it seems that for Arendt, because political action cannot solve economic problems, and because misery can become active only in destructive ways, it is best for the poor and the laborers to be kept out of the public sphere. Like women, they belong in the household, with concerns of the body" (Pitkin 1981, 335).

3 Adriana Cavarero praises Arendt's inversion of the "patriarchal tradition" which has prioritized the concept of death and mortality, while Arendt places the notion of birth and natality at the centre of her philosophy (Cavarero 1995, 6-7).

4 For an elaboration of understanding's relation to knowledge and common sense, see Borren 2013.

5 Here, meaning does not primarily refer to the meaning of words in a linguistic sense. As Veronica Vasterling writes, "[w]hereas meaning as sense making refers to the cognitive ability of comprehending the meaning of the words uttered, meaning as meaningfulness refers to the existential effort of trying to understand the world one inhabits" (Vasterling 2019, 14).

6 Also cited in Vasterling 2011, 510.

7 I recognize the difficulty of using blanket statements to try and convey what are undoubtedly multifaceted and uniquely individual experiences of oppression. I do not wish to deny or suppress this fact, however, for our purposes here, I follow Caroline Ramazanoglu's understanding of oppression to mean "[...] the various ways in which men have been seen to dominate women, and in which social structural arrangements have been seen to favour men over women." Furthermore, "oppression," she acknowledges, "is not wholly satisfactory as a term, but it is useful as a single concept which conveys the political impact of recent feminist thought" (Ramazanoglu 1989, 21).

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