

Hannah Arendt: Politics as a Pursuit of Beauty

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ABSTRACT

Politics means many things to many people. To Plato it means the pursuit of truth. Aristotle Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Marx, Hagel and others regard politics as the pursuit of good, though their concept of good differs from one another. According to Dahl politics is concerned with “authority, Ruling and power”, and David Easton regards it as the authoritative allocation of values” for a society. Again, while Lasswell defines politics as “who gets what, when and how” Dyke maintains that politics is concerned with the “management of conflicts” Besides while some regards politics as “the trade for rascals and the refuge of scoundrels”, others regards it as an “activity of saints.” Hannah Arendt is the first thinker in the history of Political through to interpret politics in terms of beauty.

KEYWORDS: Politics, Pursuit, Beauty, rascals, Salvation, Noble.

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INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt is one of the brightest stars in the firmament of contemporary political thinkers including Michael Oakeshott, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin who have contributed a lot to the revival of political theory.

Hannah Arendt is the only political philosopher who presents a unique explanation of politics. The present paper examines Arendt's political thought as an aesthetic activity which aims at making the world a beautiful place. This paper is devoted to the evaluation of politics as a noble activity, points out Arendt's objection to the traditional concepts of politics and finally explains Arendt's concept of politics as the pursuit of beauty.

Literature Reviews

Many scholars have interpreted Hannah Arendt in different ways. For instance, Dante Germino has discussed Arendt's political thought in the context of the revival of political theory. He has cited Hannah Arendt's political thought to prove that the political theory is not dead. N. K. O Sullivan has made an attempt to discuss the political thought of Arendt. But this discussion is also very selective, not exhaustive. Bhikhu Parikh, a renowned Professor of Political Philosophy has written a book on Hannah Arendt. In this book he has analyzed Arendt's view on Traditional Political Philosophy, on human condition and her vision of ideal community. George Kateb, the American writer has shed light on some important aspects of Arendt's thought such as totalitarianism, democracy and modernity. But he has confined himself to some of her ideas.

The authoress of this paper has made an attempt to describe Arendt's view mainly on the original works of Hannah Arendt. This paper is also based on various other secondary sources such as books and articles by other authors on Arendt. Hannah Arendt has presented a unique explanation of politics. She regards politics as a means of self-salvation, public happiness and public freedom. Arendt is the first thinker in the history of political thought to interpret politics in terms of beauty. She regards politics as a noble activity.

Aim of Politics

According to Arendt the aim of Politics is neither the accumulation of wealth, nor the acquisition, maintenance and expansion of power, nor the creation of perfect society not the promotion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, nor even the establishment of a classless and stateless society. Politics is an aesthetic activity, which is mainly concerned with making the world beautiful.

In addition, Arendt is the only woman philosopher who is so original that the things look different after she looks at them.

Furthermore, Hannah Arendt regards politics as a noble activity. According to her, men are not only mortal but also natal. She has made birth the central category of political and philosophical thought. In her view political philosophy is a meditation not upon death as Plato had maintained, but also upon the miracle of birth. Thus, politics is primarily concerned not with death but with birth, which signifies new beginning, creativity, appearance, hope, joy and human plurality. No one before Arendt had offered such a novel conception of politics.

Objection To Traditional Concept Of Politics:

Hannah Arendt has presented politics as an aesthetic activity, the pursuit of beauty. Before explaining her own concept of politics, Arendt has subjected traditional political philosophy to her searching criticism. By traditional political philosophy Arendt means political philosophy which was begun by Plato and includes such philosophers as Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, Hegel and Marx.¹ She regards the entire tradition of political philosophy as "inauthentic." She calls it inauthentic because it fails in appreciating the dignity and autonomy of politics, in recognizing political way of life as a noble way of life and in giving an adequate account of crucial political experiences. She has raised four main objections against traditional political philosophy.

First, traditional political philosophy does not appreciate the dignity of politics. She maintains that an activity or form of life has dignity when it is intrinsically valuable and worthy of being undertaken for its own sake. No political philosopher, with sole exception of Aristotle, in Arendt's view has regarded politics as an intrinsically worthwhile activity and has listed the political life among the noblest form of life available to man.

Arendt maintains that traditional political philosophy defines man in non-public terms. For it, man's highest good consists in such activities as the pursuit of philosophy, eternal life, moral perfection and personal happiness. These are all non-public activities.

Again, from Plato onwards philosophers have subscribed to what Arendt calls the theory of two worlds- The world of Being or Reality on the one hand, and the world of Appearance on the other. Being is of higher rank and appearance is of lower rank. Since politics is concerned with the world of appearance traditional political philosophers have not regarded it as important².

According to Arendt, the traditional philosophers expect nothing more of the world than the satisfaction of his basic wants and a safe and secure environment in which to carry on his intellectual pursuits. Since his approach to the world is purely instrumental, politics has only an instrumental value for them.

Arendt's second objection against traditional political philosophy is that it has not given an autonomous status to politics. She takes the view that the traditional political philosophy does not recognize the fact that politics raises distinct ontological, epistemological, methodological moral and other types of problems.

Arendt says that the traditional political philosophy fails to appreciate distinctively political motives, passion, principles and virtues. It also fails to analyse such categories as opinion and judgment in terms of which political knowledge is articulated³.

Arendt's third objection against traditional political philosophy is that it takes a highly formal and abstract view of the nature of political philosophy. For it, political philosophy is concerned to develop a conceptual framework capable of giving a coherent and comprehensive account of the general features of political life.

Arendt's fourth charge against traditional political philosophy is that it reduces politics to ruling. According to Arendt a truly constituted political community is characterized by a vigorous political culture, public freedom,

public happiness and the energetic participation of the people in the conduct of public affairs. But ruling is the antithesis of a political community. Under ruling each citizen minds his own business and the government enjoys the monopoly of political power and decision making.

Arendt holds the view that the questions asked by traditional philosophers contain a systematic bias in the sense that almost all of them are asked from the standpoint of the government rather than of the citizens⁴.

Another serious weakness of traditional political philosophy in Arendt's view, is that it judges political action almost entirely in utilitarian terms. It has no categories to conceptualize politics in terms of poetic, heroic and aesthetic dimension.

Arendt's main aim is to construct an authentic political philosophy on the ontological basis of birth, which dignifies new beginning, creation, appearances, joy, hope and beauty.

Politics As The Pursuit Of Beauty:

Arendt concept of politics as the pursuit of beauty follows from her tripartite scheme of labour, work and action⁵.

Labour:

According to Arendt, labour is marked by two features:

First, it is an unending process. It has no end. The work of housewife is an example of labour. She goes on cooking day after day. It is a continuous process.

The Second feature of labour is that its products are short-lived, immediately consumed, fall within the realm of necessity and are private in nature; Arendt says that the mark of labour is that "it leaves nothing behind" and that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent⁶. Labour produces nothing permanent. In short, the products of labour cannot create an objective world capable of providing men with a permanent home on earth. The labour devours the world, time devours him⁷. That is why, Arendt calls this life purely private and meaningless.

If labour produces object, it produces them only incidentally, as a means to its own reproduction strictly speaking, its only product is life itself.⁸

Work:

Work has also two features: First it is done for others, and second, its products are more durable than those of labour. This is clear from Arendt's analysis of work. According to Arendt work is neither completely private nor completely public. It produces more durable things in comparison to labour. Work is also qualitatively different from labour⁹. The products of work constitute what Arendt calls the 'world'. For her, the activities involved in producing chairs, tables, houses, tools and implements etc are all forms of work. With every durable object, man creates a distinctively human world and increases distance between them and nature.¹⁰ The world is potentially immortal, and in any case, less mortal than man. In work, man emerges for the first time to self-consciousness, since he becomes aware of his difference, as subject, from the object upon which his efforts are directed. But since the world in which he moves is world of things, and not a world of men, he does not reach the highest level of development.

Action:

Action holds the highest place in Arendt's tripartite scheme. Action is related to public realm. Arendt believes that human personality is not developed by labour at all. It is only

partially developed by work. But it is fully and perfectly developed by Action. Action is that part of the human activity through which individual reveals himself in relation to other individuals. It is primary source of meaning and value. It gives moral significance to life.

Attainment of immortality is possible only when man enters the public realm and moves among his peers. In order to achieve eternal remembrance he must establish his identity through speech and action and that is what politics is about. Thus, action includes the life of politics, thought and idea. Politics is the art which teaches man how to bring forth what is great, beautiful and radiant.¹¹

Arendt makes it clear that only a man of action, not man of labour and work, engages himself in politics and when he does so he becomes truly free and completely happy.

Thus, Arendt, unlike Oakeshott who regards politics as a second rate activity, believes that politics is the pursuit of beauty, that it is the highest form of activity; that politics alone confers meaning and value upon life; that it is through politics alone that man can be free and happy; and that politics provides only guarantee to our sanity. Thus politics is an aesthetic activity which is concerned with creation of beauty.

According to Arendt that, the articulation of the meaning of politics as the pursuit of beauty is found in non-philosophical literature of Greece and Rome¹². But not in their Philosophical writing. The Greek Philosophers were hostile to the meaning of politics because they were pre-occupied with the phenomenon of death of Socrates. The Romans were philosophically incapable of visualizing this meaning of politics. Christian philosophers were also inhospitable to the political Action. Only Machiavelli tried to classify political Action. Arendt's main aim is to supply a philosophical account of the meaning of political action.

Thus, Arendt maintains that Human personality is not developed by labour at all. It is only partially developed by work. Speech and action is what politics is about. Thus, action includes the life of politics, thought and idea. Politics is the art which teaches man how to bring forth what is great, beautiful and radiant. Its main aim is to make the world beautiful. Speech and action constitute the substance of Politics.

In Arendt's main aim is to supply a philosophical account of the meaning of Political action. According to her, genuine Political action includes founding constitutions, participation in revolutionary council governments, civil disobedience and direct citizen's participation. In Arendt's view the only vehicle to freedom is political action. Freedom becomes a direct aim only when people make a revolution and thereafter deliberately create the frame for the daily actuality of freedom.¹³

Arendt also points out that the supremely important dimension of political action is actual human existence.

Arendt maintains that in political action alone is a person revealed and there alone is light. All other places are dark and man remains obscure in them.

Content of Political Action

Thus it is clear that ambition, love, goodness, conscience, compassion, and pity are not the content of political action. These are emotions which have no place in public realm. These may be virtues for private life.

The content of political action is politics itself. Politics exists for its own sake. It is not a means to some end beyond itself. Politics exists for its own sake. It is valuable in itself. The content of political Action is politics in the sense that political action is talk about politics. Now the question is what the talk about politics means?

Talk about politics pertains either to the founding of constitution or form of government or to the defense of a constitution against internal erosion or external attack.

Thus, truly political action must involve the relations of equals, that it must precede by persuasion, that it must be comprised of great revelatory talk.

Arendt's Vision of Beautiful Politics

Arendt depicts a picture of a political community where man can develop his distinctive human capacities of impartiality, imagination, judgement and through so that he may acquire a sense of personal identity and give meaning to his life. This political community is a community Whose members passionately seek public space in all areas office. This public community is Arendt's substitute for the free or open society of the liberals. Arendt gives a vision of her political community because the main concern of her political theory is to develop a new culture based on a public way of life.

First of all, Arendt describes the nature of political community. She maintains that the family cannot create a public space because of the fact that the members of the family are not equal, that they lack Psychological independence; that their conversations are necessarily informal and non-argumentative, and that their common concerns are relatively private in nature. In Arendt's view the family is the realm of privacy par excellence.

A political Community

Arendt also discusses non-familiar organizations and associations, particularly the factory and the university and the possibilities for providing public space by them. Although in her early writings Arendt took the view that the factory cannot provide public space because it belongs to the realm of necessity and requires hierarchical organization based on command and obedience, later she changed her stand and held that factory is capable to provide a measure of formulation of policy and in deciding their common affairs with the employees. Arendt welcomed workers council in the then Yugoslavia and the Scandinavian experiments with the cooperative management of the factory¹⁴

The University may provide public space because it does not belong to the realm of necessity and its common concerns are amenable to discussion. Moreover, the university is a place where staff and students can regularly discuss and decide their common affairs.¹⁵ But Arendt says that the public space within the university is limited in scope, for its staff and students are not equal in ability to conduct their common affairs.

Although Arendt agrees that a political community must create order and reconcile conflicting opinions and interests, she does not agree with those thinkers who believe that political community exists to realize these ends.

For Arendt, similar is the case with the pursuit of order and reconciliation of interest. The manner in which men pursue these reflects their way of life Arendt wants to establish an organized collective life in which men pursue these reflects their way of life. Arendt wants to establish an organized

collective life in which men experience public freedom and happiness, acquire a sense of reality and personal identity and enjoy opportunity to live a meaningful life. Hence she insists that the pursuit of order and the reconciliation of interests should be integrated with the realization of these values.

Arendt opines that order and reconciliation of interests should be achieved politically. In a politically constituted community men conduct their common affairs by public discussion and debate and reach a consensus, which they embody in authoritative law. In such a community order is secured by citizen undertaking to obey the laws they have decided to give to themselves and collective coercion is being used in the last resort when mutual restraints exercised by citizen are no longer effective.

In Sum, politics is not a method of reconciling interest, nor a means to create order, nor a device for diffusing discontent by bringing it out into the open and nor a technique of human management. It is a way of life, which enables men to enjoy a free happy, dignified, cooperative, meaningful, peaceful and beautiful existence.

In Arendt's view, politics is the activity of conducting the affairs of a community by means of speech and the polis or a political community united by common commitment to a political way of life. The commitment to a public way of life implies that a citizen values public life places communal well being above his own, finds joy and happiness in debating and acting together with his peers, loves freedom, and takes sustained interest in his community's affairs. Just as monks make religion the organizing principle of their lives and judge everything in terms of it, citizens in a political community make politics their way of life. Politics is their self-chosen mode of being in the world.

A Community owing allegiance to a common authority is a state and if the state is governments by laws, it is a legal community. The state is not a political community because it is not politically constituted. Politics is not its organizing principle. Its members are not committed to living together in the mode of acting and speaking. In Arendt's view legal and political institution stimulate but do not guarantee Political life.

Arendt uses the term Politics in a narrower sense than the usual. According to her politics means not the state per se, but a particular manner of constituting the state and conducting its affairs.

Arendt's inquiry into the political way of life leads her to Athens and Rome. She closely examines their political institutions, ways of conducting public affairs, myths, proverbs, aphorisms and literature to distil the authentic nature of politics and political way of life.

Arendt opines that speech and action constitute the substance of Political life and the two are of the same kind. Speech is itself a form of action, a way of influencing others and bringing about desired changes, Conversely action is a form of speech, a way of communicating one's views and the intensity with which one holds them.

According to Arendt speech takes several forms and perform different functions in politics. Political speech can also be inspirational in the sense of being designed to lift the gloom of one's fellow citizens, tap their hidden resources of political skill and energy and inspire them to dare the extraordinary.

Again, Political speech may also be defined, like that of men on the verge of defeat in a war or doomed men in the Nazi concentration camps, It is then, a form of human self-assertion against the blows of a fate; a resolute attempt to bear the unbearable with dignity and pride and leave behind a shining example of courage and heroism.

Persuasion involves judgement. For Arendt political judgement is basically an aesthetic judgement. The aesthetic judgment is formed by imagination

Thus imagination performs a crucial political role.

Arendt makes it clear that in her vision of politics as the pursuit of beauty, there is no place for truth. Unlike Plato, Hegel and others, she believes that opinion or judgement is not mere opinion, but equal to truth in dignity and rank.

It doesn't however mean that Arendt is opposed to truth. Three points must be made clear in order to understand Arendt's interpretation of truth. In the first place she doesn't reject truth itself. She only rejects the belief that the truth is the highest value in all areas of life. She doesn't accept that truth has its proper place in logic, mathematics and above all the sciences where it reigns supreme. The human being in general and politics in particular are necessarily govern by tentative opinions and judgements.

Second, truth speaks in the language of rational necessity, leaves the mind no freedom of movement, demands universal assent and compels all men to think alike.

Third, it eliminates diversity of views and puts an end to the inexhaustible richness of human discourse.

Fourth, it destroys human plurality and abolishes public space and thus poses on ontological threat to the human sense of reality and personal identity.

Fifth, truth strikes at the very roots of all politics because for its validity it requires no support of opinion. Therefore, she quotes Lessing as saying "Let us thank God that we do not know the truth."¹⁶

The capacity to form an opinion or judgement on the basis of an insight and careful weighing up of relevant considerations is distant human capacity and cannot be reduced to pursue truth. For Arendt, political life represents a realm of opinion and is governed by judgement. She does not provide truth place in politics.¹⁷

According to Arendt the government should perform little or no function in economic field. In fact, like Plato Arendt pleads for a complete separation between politics and economics. Although Arendt is well aware of the dangers posed by economics to politics and regards economics as the enemy of politics

In Arendt's political theory, politics is concerned with arrangement and appearance of the physical space. In other words, it is concerned with how the world, is to look. For her architecture is a political art in the sense that it structures physical space and designs the visible public world.

Thus, according to Arendt politics is the means through which citizens appear and present themselves to one another, maintain their distinctive identity, manifest their political virtuosity, and undertake deeds, capable of illuminated historical time.

Arendt believes in a participatory political structure which is built up from bottom upward. If the political way of life is to

become a reality and political freedom an everyday experience in the lives of its citizens, it is vital to experiment with and devise new political forms capable of combining effective popular participation with a viable central government.

Thus, according to Arendt politics is concerned with such matters as ecology, architecture, political virtues and development of new political and economic institutions.

The main aim of politics is to develop a new culture based on a public way of life. She identifies politics not with death, coercion and punishment but with birth which signifies a new beginning, creativity, uniqueness, joy and hope.

Pursuit of Beauty

By beauty Arendt does mean a face shining with powder and lipstick. Politics becomes beautiful when it is saturated with virtue, freedom, happiness and willing participation of the people. Politics is the pursuit of beauty for more reasons than one:

1. It is beautiful because its driving force is service, not power; cooperation not coercion; public interest not private interest.
2. Through willing participation of people frame a constitution and defend it from internal erosion.
3. Framing a constitution imply that politics means to create, to begin, to start something new.
4. It is through public participation that citizen become equal free and happy human being.
5. Politics alone gives meaning, value and significance to man.
6. It is through politics alone that man knows others and known by them.
7. It is only through politics that man can attain immortality and establish his identity.
8. Politics is the noblest activity which gives profoundest joy.
9. It is the natal not mortal activity. It is meditation upon birth, not upon death.
10. It is the place of sanity where there is no loneliness.
11. Finally, it is beautiful because it is concerned with ecology, architecture, political virtue and development of new political and economic destitute. She identifies politics with birth which signifies a new beginning, creativity, uniqueness, joy and hope.

Criticisms Against Arendt's View Of Politics

It is true that Hannah Arendt's idea of Politics is original. She offers brilliant insights and breaks new ground. Nevertheless, several objections may be raised against it.

First, though the aim of Arendt's politics is to make world beautiful, she has failed to explain what beauty is. Public sense exists not only in political community but also in other organizations.

Second, Arendt is also wrong in saying that political community only provides public space.

Third, Arendt's view of politics prevents her from giving an adequate account of political life.

Fourth, Arendt's view of politics is so narrow that it cannot take full account of complexity of political life. Except the

concern for the world and allegiance to the constitution, man shares nothing in common with others.

Fifth, Arendt seems to treat politics as if it were almost entirely a matter of appearance and style and reduces action to acting.

Finally, Arendt's attempt to make politics beautiful is aesthetic and aesthetic dimension cannot validate a real principle

Conclusion

Thus, Hannah Arendt has presented a completely new and unique concept of politics as the pursuit of beauty. This is her most important contribution to the field of contemporary political theory. In conclusion it may, therefore, be said that Hannah Arendt is one of the most exciting and original political thinkers of modern age. She lays the foundation of a new political theory as the pursuit of beauty. She seems to believe life is the gift but the beautiful living is the gift of wisdom.

References

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- [2] Ibid, p-204
- [3] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (New York: Viking Press, 1963) p.231
- [4] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) p-230
- [5] It is interesting to know that Aristotle has also divided human activity into three kinds. They are: Work, Play and Leisure. Work is that which one does for others. Play is reaction against the work. Leisure doesn't mean idleness or rest. When one devotes oneself to contemplation, one is said to be in leisure. It is why Aristotle regards only those persons as citizens who have leisure.
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