

Arendt among the Cynics

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Of all the attacks on intellectuals in magazines, reviews, journals, and now the internet, none are more fitting than those on Hannah Arendt. This judgment is not about her person, but rather about her work, for one of its principal themes is the public sphere's debasement and dignity. For this reason, too, Arendt deserves equally the accolades of the public sphere, accolades which Plato considered as valuable to the philosopher as fame is for a dead man.

Now, I am not at all curious or especially knowledgeable about Arendt's personality, and only slightly more invested in the details of her intellectual project; therefore, in no way should my paper be taken as a defense of either. My concern with Arendt extends only as far as what she has to say, in her reflections on the public sphere, about how truth is threatened by cynicism. Cynicism differs as a threat to truth from skepticism, and since the former has received far less attention than the latter, a few preliminary words about their difference are in order. While the skeptic doubts that the truth of any belief can be established with absolute certainty, she must remain committed to evaluating propositions which claim to be true; otherwise, she contradicts her skepticism by becoming dogmatic about her own position. She must remain, in short, invested in truth. Not so the cynic. The cynic does not so much deny that an apodictic truth can be found "out there" as deny that any truth "out there" is worth knowing, for whereas "out there" for the skeptic is inaccessible reality, "out there" for the cynic is contemptible society. The cynic takes it, in a nutshell, that truth is a matter of discourse; that discourse is a function of speakers' motivations; and that speakers' motivations are characterized by such ignoble and self-serving human tendencies as lying, bullshitting, and sophistry. Whether there is a good response to the cynic is still unclear to me, but it is something I'd like to determine. Hence my interest in Arendt who can provides one way to deal with

cynicism. Her approach, in a nutshell, is to thwart cynicism before it takes hold by protecting the meaningfulness of public discourse.

Arendt offers only occasional remarks on truth and cynicism – often in the context of discussions of totalitarianism – with her most important statement appearing in “Truth and Politics.” The key passage runs: “the surest long-term result of brainwashing is a peculiar kind of cynicism – an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established. In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearing in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the means to this end – is being destroyed.” The cynicism described here is much more the stuff of science fiction than of actual circumstances. Over the course of her essay, Arendt conjures up the possibility of a regime with “a power monopoly over the entire civilized world” that attempts the “mass manipulation of fact and opinion” by means of “our present system of world-wide communication” as well as “a few tricks from business practices and Madison Avenue methods.” While this scenario is not inconceivable and speculating about it has theoretical value, one need not contemplate anything so far-flung in order to imagine how widespread cynicism might begin to take hold. Its emergence does not require anything near “a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth;” indeed, it does not even require anything as malicious and politically-motivated as lying at all. All it really takes to make the distinction between truth and falsehood largely insignificant is a general confusion about the distinction between outright falsehood and mere opinion, or, in other words, the assumption that even simple facts independent of perspective and interpretation do not exist. And while Arendt primarily blames impotent liars for exploiting this confusion, the first half of her essay tells a story about how this view emerges, on the one hand, within Enlightenment political philosophy’s defense of free speech and of the public sphere, and, on the other hand, within methodological reflections on historical scholarship.

Arendt's "Truth and Politics" merits attention, however, not only for its theoretical reflections on the fate of truth in the modern world, reflections first published in no less public a venue than *The New Yorker* (February 25, 1967), but also for the public controversy which occasioned the reflections, namely, the controversy that followed in the wake of Arendt's coverage of the Eichmann trial. The essay is, along with the "Postscript" to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, part of Arendt's response to "the amazing amount of lies used in the 'controversy' – lies about what [she] had written, on one hand, and about facts that [she] reported, on the other." But whereas the "Postscript" tackled the lies head on in order to set the historical record straight about both her coverage of the trial and the facts which it publicized, the essay contemplated more abstractly the conditions under which facts can lose or maintain their normative, binding force.

These two tasks (establishing factual truths and establishing the conditions for factual truths) are not identical, but they are inseparable – at least that is my premise here. And I see this premise as one way in which we might understand the related concerns of history and philosophy as disciplines. Here I come to the first and the broader of the two contexts in which I want to consider Arendt's discussion of the threat of cynicism. At the AJS meeting last year, Derek Penslar arranged a session for the American Academy for Jewish Research. The title of the session was "Jewish Thought and Jewish History: Conversation Partners or Two Solitudes?" Derek was kind of enough to share with me the email in which he described the topic. It said: "the disciplines of history and philosophy often co-exist without interacting, and we need to consider if this is also the case for Jewish Studies despite the centrality of both thought and history in the tradition of Judaic scholarship dating back to the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. A particularly clear example of the lack of communication between the fields is the historical study of Jewish politics as opposed to Jewish political theory, and I've asked the panelists to deal with this specific issue in their presentations." The desire to convene such a session assumes that, while historians and philosophers generally do not speak to each other, they perhaps ought to, and that they perhaps ought to speak to each other because they ought to have some common interest. The problem, then, is identifying an interest common to two disciplines that, according

to one widespread view, are differentiated by a concern with facts, in the case of history, and a concern with norms, in the case of philosophy. (It was, I believe, exactly in terms of this split between facts and norms that two of the panelists, David Novak and David Myers, addressed Derek's question.) If my reading of "Truth and Politics" is right, then Arendt points to a common interest between the two disciplines, and even tells a story about how that common interest emerged. She suggests, as I have mentioned, that historians and philosophers today do share both a positive interest in establishing that facts are at once true as well as normative, and therefore also a negative interest in diminishing the cause of cynicism.

It is not surprising that an interest common to historians and philosophers would be found in Arendt's work. She is, after all, read by both philosophers and historians, and especially by political philosophers and political historians, that is, by precisely those specialists among whom Derek has observed a "particularly clear example of the lack of [inter-disciplinary] communication." But recently an argument has been made that Arendt should not be read by historians, and perhaps not by anyone. This is the second, more specific context in which I want to consider Arendt's views on the threat of cynicism.

In the October 2009 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Bernard Wasserstein attempts to puncture the inflated reputation that Arendt supposedly earned for her contribution to intellectual life in the second half of the twentieth century. The 3-page article received a surprising amount of attention – surprising because, as Wasserstein himself conceded, very little about his attack was original. The sole original contribution was, according to Wasserstein, a discovery concerning the anti-Jewish sources which informed Arendt's picture of the Jews in the second part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. I will come back to this contribution shortly. First, however, I want to note that just as surprising as the amount of attention to what Wasserstein said was the amount of confusion over what exactly he meant. Many responses to Wasserstein asserted that Arendt was not a bad or self-hating Jew, while Wasserstein replied that he never claimed Arendt was a bad Jew, only a bad historian. That there would be a fundamental confusion about

what an author meant is not an uncommon feature of public discourse and therefore not irrelevant to the problem of the social nature of truth. Moreover, that the confusion in this case would be about an apparently ad hominem argument against someone's scholarship is not irrelevant to the spread of cynicism. I will return at the conclusion of my talk to the confusion about whether Wasserstein disparaged only Arendt the historian or also Arendt the person and Arendt the Jew.

But should Arendt be considered a historian at all? Is she not rather a political philosopher or theorist? Wasserstein insists that she should be considered a historian because she “prefer[red] to define herself” in this way, and his insistence that the preference was hers rather than his own is crucial to his argument. His evidence comes from a quote in which Arendt calls herself “something between a historian and a publicist.” On this basis, Wasserstein concludes that, although Arendt is “located in the triangular borderland of scholarship, journalism, and public debate,” “in the light of her self-description it seems reasonable to consider her on her own estimation as a historian.” He reiterated this point both in a lecture at the University of Toronto and in an online symposium for *Front-page Magazine*, saying that he “was concerned specifically with puncturing Arendt’s claim to be taken seriously as a historian.” Notice that Wasserstein drops the publicist side of Arendt’s self-description, though the warrant for evaluating her exclusively as a publicist is just as strong – or just as weak – as the warrant for evaluating her exclusively as a historian. That is not to say that I am curious to know whether Wasserstein would find Arendt a good publicist, or at least a better publicist than a historian. But I am curious to know whether he believes, as he seems to imply, that someone who defines herself as a historian-publicist could also claim to be taken seriously as a historian as such. As little as historians and philosophers may be conversations partners, it is safe to say that they recognize each other as legitimate university colleagues in ways that neither historians nor philosophers think of publicists. The quote, in other words, seems to be flimsy evidence for evaluating Arendt as a historian.

As it turns out, however, Wasserstein's proof-text is not only flimsy, but also false. The error – which, I suspect, was careless rather than deliberate – was exposed by Ronald Beiner, who was the respondent when Wasserstein visited the University of Toronto. Curious about the larger context of Wasserstein's un-referenced quotation, Beiner reported that he quickly hunted down the source which, he discovered, was a letter in which Arendt was describing to Karl Jaspers not her intellectual vocation and identity but rather how she had been earning her livelihood as a freelance writer during the four years since her arrival in America in 1941. With this clarification of Arendt's statement, no compelling grounds to evaluate Arendt as a historian remained, and so Beiner's response proceeded with an explanation of Arendt's intellectual importance as a political theorist.

Seen from a perspective in which Arendt might hold out a hope of identifying an interest common to historians and philosophers, the exchange between Beiner and Wasserstein was as disappointing as it was ironic. Beiner, the self-described political theorist, took Wasserstein, the historian, to task for failing to investigate the sources which informed his understanding of Arendt, just as Wasserstein had taken Arendt to task as a historian for failing to scrutinize the sources which informed her understanding of the Jews. Beiner, however, never made this parallel explicit because, as was clear implicitly from his response, it does not matter to him whether Arendt was a good historian: historians have one set of interests, political theorists have another. Wasserstein's category mistake meant he judged apples by the standards of good oranges.

With yet another failed dialogue between historian and philosopher, the exchange between Wasserstein and Beiner proved ironic in one more regard. Upon closer inspection of Wasserstein's argument, it becomes clear that at some level he and Beiner concur about the split between historians and philosophers. Reiterating a charge made by others before him, Wasserstein criticizes Arendt as an "essentializer" who "discounted the role of contingency in history and tried to fit everything into one overall pattern to which she claimed to have discovered the key;" who, having "little grasp of or interest in the

mechanics of the political process of the states in which she wrote,” “snapped up unconsidered trifles of evidence and inflated them into richly colored balloons of generalizations;” who “selected ‘the most universalizable tendencies for the purpose of hypostatizing them into essences;” who has an “essentialized approach [that] renders [her psychological analysis of the concentration camps] of limited value as history.” Essentializing, generalizing, universalizing, fitting everything into an overall pattern – these intellectual tendencies, especially when contrasted with an interest in contingent processes, precise mechanics, and specific contexts, are a standard complaint which historians have about philosophers. That Wasserstein approves of this complaint is adumbrated in the opening lines of his article. He begins by citing Lucian’s criticism of “a certain philosopher from Corinth who ‘put forward an overly clever argument that only a philosopher should write history.” Wasserstein, however, quickly moves away from the direct inference of the Greek satirist’s anecdote (which, it is funny to note, is most probably about Diogenes, the father of ancient Cynicism, who spent the last years of his life in Corinth). Why does Wasserstein imply, but not explicitly conclude, that the detailed facts of history should be entrusted least of all to philosophers and their over-clever arguments? The reason, I suspect, is that arguing that Arendt, as a philosopher, is a bad historian would be even less novel than the claim Wasserstein does offer. Hence the need to make the case that Arendt is being judged on terms *not* which he imposes, but which she freely accepts. But Wasserstein does not successfully make this case, and consequently his larger argument that Arendt is a bad historian begins to look trivial.

Can Wasserstein’s argument be salvaged? That is, even if Beiner is right – and I believe he is – that Arendt is a political theorist or a political philosopher and not a historian *per se*, must we cling to the ancient divide according to which the excellence and interest of the philosophers does not overlap at all with the excellence and interest of the historians? More importantly, does Arendt herself maintain the divide? Or does she instead acknowledge that her philosophical vocation has some common ground with the

task of the historian? The answer, as I have already suggested, is that, according to Arendt, philosopher and historian are both committed to defending the truth and normativity of facts, especially once they enter the public sphere where they are most vulnerable.

Now, with this suggestion about a common interest of philosophers and historians, Arendt also proves to be in perfect agreement with Wasserstein about the basic task of the historian. Reiterating in his conclusion his principal question about how Arendt's work should be assessed as history, Wasserstein again cites Lucian, who considers the most important trait of the historian a fearlessness and openness "to call a fig a fig and a tub a tub." The statement echoes the ancient view about the nature of truth, which is to say of what is that it is. Arendt also cites this view. And, significantly, she credits it not to Aristotle, as philosophers are wont to do, but rather to Herodotus, the father of history, who prizes *legein ta onta*, saying the things themselves.

Even more surprising than this agreement between Wasserstein and Arendt about the fundamental task of the historian is Wasserstein's concession that, on these terms, Arendt is not a bad historian. *But he should not grant Arendt this much*, at least not if his discovery of Arendt's profound reliance on anti-Jewish sources for her picture of the Jews is not at bottom trivial. But triviality is the least grievous shortcoming of Wasserstein's argument. It seems to me virtually impossible that a reliance on anti-Jewish sources would not prevent Arendt from being able to say what really is. And yet, instead of offering a corrective which would help us assess just how far she distorts historical facts, Wasserstein opts to explain her use of these sources as the result of her internalization of their negative attitude towards Jews and Jewish history. Arendt might be a terrible historian, and Wasserstein might be a terrific historian whose assessment of Arendt's scholarship and outlook might be entirely right. *But who will care unless facts and truth still matter?* Say whatever else you want about Arendt, she at least is a steadfast enemy of cynicism.