

TOTAL LONELINESS: HANNAH ARENDT AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF TOTALITARIANISM

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Hannah Arendt set out to answer the question "What is Totalitarianism" by looking at Nazism and Bolshevism, the two totalitarian movements that scarred the mid-twentieth century. She understood totalitarianism to aim at the total evisceration of freedom. Totalitarian rule aims for the "total domination of the population of the earth, the elimination of every competing nontotalitarian reality."¹ Since one person who can think and change their mind will pierce the totalitarian control of reality, total domination must obliterate spontaneity and freedom. The totalitarian effort is to transform a plurality of persons into a unity; it is to "fabricate something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other animal species whose only 'freedom' would consist in 'preserving the species.'"² The total loss of both external and internal freedom is the drive of total domination.

The Origins of Totalitarianism appeared in its first edition in 1951. By Arendt's own account, it was incomplete. She wrote, "there were certain insights of a strictly theoretical nature, closely connected with my analysis of the elements of total domination, which I did not possess when I finished the original manuscript."³ As brilliant as the original book was in its inquiry into the origins and characteristics of totalitarianism, it lacked an understanding of totalitarianism itself.

Arendt returned to the question of totalitarianism in a series of papers and drafts beginning in 1952. Most importantly, in "Ideology and Terror," Arendt sought to "introduce German audiences to the major conclusions which she had arrived at in studying the catastrophes which they had all one way or another so recently survived. She delivered the paper in lectures in June and July of 1952 in Tübingen, Cologne, Frankfurt, and Heidelberg;⁴ she also gave a version of "Ideology and Terror" in English in Manchester, England.⁵ In 1955 she included "Ideologie und Terror" as a new final chapter in the German edition of the book and in 1958 she appended it as an Epilogue to the second English language edition. "Ideology and Terror" is, as Barbara Hahn and James McFarland write, "one of Arendt's weightiest statements."⁶

"Ideology and Terror" makes four key arguments by way of setting forth an account of totalitarianism. First, it reaffirms Arendt's guiding insight that totalitarianism is a novel form of government, distinct from tyranny, despotism and fascism. Arendt writes of the "earth-shattering originality of totalizing methods of organization" and the "extraordinary originality of totalizing domination-and-organization-methods."⁷ In both Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Soviet Russia,

totalitarianism "developed entirely new political institutions and destroyed all social, legal, and political traditions of the country."⁸ The drive of total domination is not simply to pacify and control a population—as past tyrants had wanted—but to organize a people in accord with a single animating idea.

The originality of totalitarianism suggests that it is tied to our modern age so that the dangers of totalitarianism will not disappear simply because Nazism and Bolshevism have been defeated. Totalitarianism is not some accidental occurrence. It is "no mere threat from the outside, no mere result of some aggressive foreign policy of either Germany or Russia." It is not simply the result of charismatic leaders named Hitler and Stalin and "it will no more disappear with the death of Stalin than it disappeared with the fall of Nazi Germany."⁹ Totalitarianism is rooted in "the true problems of our time." And these problems "cannot be understood, let alone solved, without the acknowledgement that totalitarianism became this century's curse only because it so terrifyingly took care of its problems."¹⁰ The problems of our century—the problems of atomism, homelessness, rootlessness, and loneliness—create masses of people who find the anomie of reality unbearable and crave a better fictional world, one that better responds to their needs for purpose and meaning. The reason totalitarianism will not disappear and the reason we must confront it in its concrete reality is that it emerges as a meaningful and radically original answer to the modern human condition.

Second, totalitarian subjects are molded to fit the laws of totalitarian movements by terror. Terror is the essence of totalitarian government because totalitarianism is predicated on the most radical denial of freedom. The traditional denial of freedom "is common to all tyrannies and is of no primary importance for understanding the peculiar nature of totalitarianism."¹¹ But in tyrannies, people are still free to congregate amongst their friends and live a meaningful private life. Only in totalitarianism does terror seek to so fully terrorize those who deviate from the prescribed ideology that they abandon their human capacity for spontaneity. Terror is the essence of totalitarian rule because the "iron band of terror" eliminates all human initiative. Terror thus neuters all human opposition to the total domination of man by an ideological movement.

"Terror," Arendt writes, "is the realization of the law of a movement."¹² It is also the "execution of a law of movement whose ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind."¹³ The Nazi movement sought to create a new species of Aryan masters. This required that sub-races be identified and eliminated. Even when Jews are innocent of any opposition to Nazism, they are its objective enemies; as natural decadents, their presence is an affront to the superiority of Aryans. It is in the effort of fulfilling the "law of nature" that makes Aryans superior that the Jews must be killed.

Similarly, the Bolshevik movement aimed to create a communist utopia free of classes and private property. The movement promises that the laws of history will eliminate classes and bring about

a classless society. Bourgeois decadents and aristocrats must be killed to fulfill the historical laws of dialectical materialism. In both instances, terror names the means by which subjectively innocent persons can be killed in the name of a higher laws of nature and history. "Terror is lawfulness, if law is the law of the movement of some suprahuman force, Nature or history."¹⁴

Third, if terror is the essence of totalitarian government, ideology is its activating principle. Ideology is a pseudoscience characterized not by its content, but by its uncompromising commitment to logicity. Ideologies are "isms"—characterized by a pseudoscientific capacity to "explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise."¹⁵ As an "instrument of explanation," ideologies work according to strict logicity: racism, for example, "is the belief that there is a motion inherent in the very idea of race," according to which "whatever happens, happens according the logical of one 'idea.'"¹⁶ From the simple idea of racial superiority of Aryans and inferiority of Jews, all the world's problems can be explained.

Racism and Marxism—the two great ideologies of twentieth century totalitarian movements—employ different explanations to explain the mastery of Aryans and the proletariat alongside the oppression of Jews and the bourgeoisie. What they share as ideologies is a belief that their particular program of development towards a racial or classist utopia depends on the strict compliance with ideological purity. Since one idea is "sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise," ideological thinking exchanges "the freedom inherent in man's capacity to think for the strait jacket of logic."¹⁷ When ideologies combine with terror, the result is an iron bond that bind persons in a totalizing logical system; the ideology defines the system and terror enforces it.

Finally, if ideology and terror are the essence and principle of totalitarian rule, they do not arise out of nowhere. Totalitarianism as a fundamentally new form of collective rule must be based upon an equally new experience of human togetherness. Totalitarianism blooms in a particular desert. Arendt names that desert loneliness.

Loneliness, of course, is not a new phenomenon. But Arendt argues that loneliness has transformed itself in the modern age. Throughout human history, loneliness was a "borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century."¹⁸ Yes, there were lonely people, but most people were not lonely most of the time.

Beginning in the modern age, however, loneliness becomes a mass phenomenon with a metaphysical dimension. Increasingly people feel adrift amidst the purposeless of human life, amidst the death of God, and amidst the break in tradition. In the first version of *Ideologie und Terror*, the word Arendt uses to describe the feeling of loneliness is *Verlassenheit*, or abandonment. "The Foundational experience on which terror rests as the essence of totalitarian domination and ideological-logical

thinking as the principal of its action is abandonment."¹⁹ To be abandoned is to be lost in the world and it is this being-lost that is the foundation for the rise of totalitarianism.

In making sense of the new phenomena of loneliness, Arendt distinguishes it from both solitude and isolation. Solitude is when you are by yourself but thinking with yourself and thus engaged with another. Arendt cites Cato who says: "never was he less alone than when he was alone," which she glosses as, "never was he less lonely than when he was in solitude."²⁰ The solitary person may be alone, but he is not lonely because she is with herself: "The solitary man...is alone and therefore 'can be together with himself' since men have the capacity of 'talking with themselves.' In solitude, in other words, I am 'by myself,' together with myself, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others."²¹ When you are in solitude, you are engaged and wrapped up in a discussion with yourself. That is the opposite of being lonely.

Loneliness is also distinguished from isolation, the experience Arendt associates with tyranny. It is in tyranny that one is prevented from political gatherings in public and isolated from others in the political realm. To be isolated is to be incapable of collective action; it has its root in police states in tyrannies, and "one of the primary concerns of all tyrannical government is to bring this isolation about."²² Tyrannies deny political freedom to its citizens; and tyrannies are inhuman forms of government insofar as they limit citizens in their core political capacities.

As bad as tyrannies are, it is also the case that tyrannies are part of the long history of human political history. Tyranny denies political freedom, but it allows freedom in private life; one can in tyranny still live free insofar as one can pursue one's unique dreams as a dancer, chess player, or writer. Humans can live under tyranny because freedom continues to exist. Totalitarianism, however, attacks and eliminates all human freedom.

What then is loneliness if it is neither solitude nor isolation? Arendt explains in a marginal note to an early version of "Ideology and Terror" that loneliness is not "a psych[ological] factor but a form of the modern human condition."²³ It is a way of being in the world, one that is fundamentally new. Above all, loneliness is the condition of being abandoned by all others and even by oneself. "The despair of loneliness is its very dumbness, admitting no dialogue."²⁴ Neither a conversation with others nor the dialogue with myself that takes place in solitude is available to the lonely person. In loneliness I am "deserted by all human companionship."²⁵

Loneliness contributes to both the homelessness and rootlessness of modern life. The homeless are those who live in the world without a place where they belong. The rootless have lost their connection to a history, a tradition, a people, and a family. And the superfluous simply do not matter. "To be uprooted," Arendt explains, "means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all."²⁶ At the center of what it means to be lonely are the feelings of meaninglessness and purposelessness. Humans are

meaning-making beings, and we cannot live apart from a web of relationships that give our lives purpose. To be abandoned and without purpose and meaning is the fate of the lonely.

To be meaningful, to matter, is the core of what it is to be human for Arendt. And it will turn out that a meaningful human life is one that aims at and in some sense achieves a measure of immortality. Sigmund Freud famously said that "only religion can answer the question of the purpose of life."²⁷ Arendt would add tradition and politics as two other ways that mortal beings can transcend into what she calls an earthly immortality.²⁸ The death of God and the break in tradition threaten to leave humanity adrift, meaningless, and lonely. But Arendt hopes that politics, broadly conceived as the activity of building a lasting and common world, can aspire to build immortal things absent religion and amidst the break in tradition. To live a meaningful life is to have said and done things that are remembered, made into stories, and preserved after one has died. What distinguishes humans in their humanity is the capacity to act meaningfully and achieve a political immortality.

This connection between human meaningfulness and immortality is already nascent in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where Arendt argues that the only true human right is the right to speak and act in public in ways that matter. "The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective."²⁹ To be human is to have the right to be seen and to be heard; to be taken seriously; to be significant; and to matter. To matter is to be seen and heard in a way that one's actions are worthy of being noticed and being remembered. To be human is in an important sense bound up with creating memorable acts that will insert one into the public world in both the present and into the future.

Meaningfulness correlates with immortality because those who are seen and heard in ways that matter will partake in lastingness, permanence, and thus immortality. The standard against which human life is measured is "the things that are forever." Human deeds, however, are fleeting. As soon as one acts, the deed is lost, so that human action is one of "the most futile and least lasting activities of men."³⁰ "Greatness for much of human history was understood in terms of permanence," something that was never a matter of course for human action.³¹ To be meaningful is to be seen and taken seriously in such a way that one's memory is assured beyond one's mortal life. To be human is to build things that last, to tell stories that immortalize our deeds, and to create political communities that carry a humanly created world into the future. What this means is that it is human to strive for great deeds that make an enduring and even immortal mark upon the world.

The task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things—works and deeds and words—which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves.³²

We humans actualize our humanity when we artificially create and live in a humanly built world that aspires to immortality. All of us want to matter and to endure beyond our human lives. But only some of us are willing to take the risk of acting and speaking in public that can lead to immortal fame.

Loneliness is akin to the loss of a world in which humans strive for immortality. It relates to Arendt's recognition that "Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible."³³ Against the religious and philosophical transcendence into universal standards, Arendt imagines another form of political unity based in those "activities in which men are related and communicate with each other, that is *lexis*, speech, and *praxis*, action."³⁴ While the universal standards of religion and philosophy are unspeakable and found in "the truest solitude and ultimately in speechlessness," the togetherness of politics on earth means "being caught in the web of relationships and interdependencies of human affairs through speaking and acting."³⁵ For Arendt, politics depends on transcendence; but against the Western philosophical tradition that seeks transcendence through universals, and against religious traditions that conceive of transcendence into a divinely created universe, Arendt imagines an immanent transcendence founded in human relations that bring about a common world.

The modern loneliness Arendt identifies begins in the shattering of collective dreams and common hopes. We live amidst what Carol Becker calls the "agitated now," a time where the narrative that binds the past to the present is broken. Amidst the breakdown of the common world, there is an ever-present feeling "that our lives are discontinuous, that we have lost the sense of home that once anchored us to the physical world, that we have disrupted the continuity of generations (families are dispersed across the nation and the world, trying to stay connected), and that we cannot envision a path to the future."³⁶ Geographically dispersed, spiritually isolated, and above all lonely and purposeless, we are today adrift and abandoned.

Arendt's name for the "agitated now" is the "break in our tradition."³⁷ The fact of the break in the tradition leaves what Arendt calls a "gap between past and future." It is in this gap—this space where traditions can no longer offer the answers to fundamental moral and political questions—that we live today. To live in the gap is to be thrown back on ourselves absent a meaningful past that guides our present and future. "The crisis of the present world," Arendt writes, "consists primarily in the decline of the Roman trinity of religion, tradition, and authority, with the concomitant undermining of the specifically Roman foundations of the political realm."³⁸ Absent religion, tradition, and authority, we have to think for ourselves; we have to "think without bannisters," to use another of Arendt's metaphors.

Arendt finds both danger and freedom in the break of the tradition. The loss of authority, once broken, is unlikely to be reestablished. With the "loss of the groundwork for the world," it is true that "we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an

unquestionable meaningfulness."³⁹ The loss of tradition is the loss of a "thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past."⁴⁰ Amidst the break of tradition, politics still happens, but it is focused negatively. We can fight against tyranny or anarchy. But there is an "ominous silence that still answers us whenever we dare to ask, not, "What are fighting *against*" but "What are we fighting *for*?"⁴¹ What is lost in the modern age is the actuality of a shared common world. The political fight *for* a positive and inspiring political ideal is no longer conceivable except as a dangerous exercise in authoritarian nostalgia.

Arendt saw clearly the political implications of modern loneliness. It is in response the threat of meaninglessness and the rise of mass loneliness that the political possibility of totalitarianism arises. Totalitarianism is one answer to the needs of a population suffering from loneliness and yearning to belong to a meaningful world. What totalitarianism offers the lonely people is a coherent fiction that promises to make our insignificant lives meaningful. Against the alternative of "facing anarchic growth and total arbitrariness of decay," totalitarianism offers the more appealing option of "bowing down before the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology."⁴² By promising a totalizing narrative that gives purpose to a people, totalitarianism offers lonely people what they most want. And faced with the choice between loneliness and totalitarian oppression, the lonely masses will always choose the totalitarianism, "and this not because they are stupid or wicked, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them a minimum of self-respect."⁴³

As powerful as totalitarian fictions are, they are, as fictions, constantly threatened by reality. They can only be held together by the terror of totalitarian states. That is why Arendt warns that totalitarianism remains an ever-present possibility so long as we continue to live in a world that fails to provide meaning to an increasingly homeless and rootless people.

The challenge of an anti-totalitarian politics today is to build meaningful institutions without the nostalgic recourse to the bannisters and pillars of a broken tradition. The imminent transcendence Arendt has in mind comes from the practice of living together and not from abstract ideals. In attending to, hearing, and understanding others, one reaches beyond one's limited perspective to build a common world. Only in this kind of transcendence from within can we confront anew "the elementary problems of human-living together," without a religious trust in a self-evident standards of behavior.⁴⁴ The challenge of politics in the modern age becomes, to build a meaningful center around which the many can gather without falling prey to the totalitarian temptation to create a coherent ideological fantasy that will need to be enforced with terror.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (A Harvest Book: New York, 1976) 392.

² Id. 438.

³ Id. xxiv.

⁴ Hahn and McFarland speculate it is possible that she may have begun the essay earlier, in English, but they cannot be sure. See Barbara Hahn and James McFarland, "Commentary," in *Hannah Arendt, The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buchs*, in "Hannah Arendt, Kritische Gesamtausgabe," vol. 6 Complete Works. Critical Edition. edited by Barbara Hahn, Hermann Kappelhoff, Patchen Markell, Ingeborg Nordmann und Thomas Wild (Wallstein Verlag, 2019) 611-613; 606.

⁵ Id. 606.

⁶ Id. 606.

⁷ Arendt, "Ideology und Terror," in *The Modern Challenge to Tradition*, 11; 26

⁸ Origins, 460.

⁹ Origins, 460.

¹⁰ See "Concluding Remarks" in the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, Brace and Company: New York, 1951) 430.

¹¹ Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Harcourt Brace & Company: New York, 1994) 328.

¹² Origins, 465.

¹³ Origins, 465.

¹⁴ Origins, 465.

¹⁵ Origins, 468.

¹⁶ Origins, 469.

¹⁷ Origins, 470.

¹⁸ Origins, 478.

¹⁹ Arendt, "Ideologie und Terror," in *The Modern Challenge to Tradition*, 18.

²⁰ Origins, 476.

²¹ Origins, 476.

²² Origins, 474.

²³ Arendt, "Proto Ideology and Terror" in *The Modern Challenge to Tradition*, 62.

²⁴ Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," 359.

²⁵ Origins, 474.

²⁶ Origins, 475.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (W.W. Norton: New York, 1961) 24.

²⁸ See Roger Berkowitz, "Actions that Deserve to be Remembered: Immortality and Greatness in a Secular World," in *Faith in the World: Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt*, ed. by Rafael Zawisza and Ludger Hagedorn, forthcoming 2020.

²⁹ Origins, 296.

³⁰ Arendt, "The Concept of History," in Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin Books: New York, 2006) 45.

³¹ Id.

³² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago: Chicago, 1958) 19.

³³ Id. 55.

³⁴ Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," in Arendt, *The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buchs*, 501.

³⁵ Id. 502.

³⁶ Carol Becker, *The Agitated Now: Perceptions of Time and the Contemplative Space of Art*, The Kimon Friar Lectures in Neo-Hellenic Arts & Letters (The Attica Tradition: Greece, 2018)

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," in *Between Past and Future* 26.

³⁸ Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future* 140.

³⁹ Id. 95.

⁴⁰ Id. 94.

⁴¹ Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," 27.

⁴² *Origins*, 352.

⁴³ *Origins*, 352.

⁴⁴ Arendt, "What is Authority?" 141.