

In Search of a Political Ethics of Intersubjectivity: Between Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas and the Judaic

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My dissertation explores the possibility of an approach to the political that is rooted in intersubjectivity and by this means creates a space for an ethics that arises from within the polis. It arose in response to the contemporary lack of interest (and general disdain) in the political among citizens in developed nations, especially among those of my generation as well as in response to the post-Shoah call Never Again. These concerns led me to seek an approach to the political that was inspirational, that could motivate individuals to participate, as well as one that approached the 'other' in positive rather than negative terms. The first, as I hope to make clear in part one, is certainly to be found in the thought of Hannah Arendt and the second in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. After considering both authors, I was struck by several resonances (and many discordances) in their different projects. It is these resonances that also pointed the way towards the Judaic. It is this goal that led me to ask whether an intersubjective approach to the political may help to revitalise this realm of human interaction. Intersubjectivity, it seemed to me, is the bridge between Arendt's notion of the political as rooted in plurality and Levinas' ethics of alterity, a bridge that may also be a response to the hope that humanity will never again experience its inhumanity. My hypothesis is that because of the tendency, partially determined by history, to view the political in terms of singularity, are reflection on what is in fact central to the political – the relations between people – has been overlooked.

Before turning to their thought, I would like to begin by presenting snippets of their life stories, exemplary of many Jewish intellectuals in the twentieth century. Born in 1906 in central Europe, both studied, for different periods of time, in Germany. More particularly both studied in Heidelberg with Heidegger whose words and deeds forever left its mark. Arendt and Levinas did in fact share the same classroom in the 20's and yet it was for different courses. Confronted by the rising antisemitism, both Arendt and Levinas were forced to dramatically re-orient the course of their lives. Interestingly while both sought refuge in Paris in the 30's, travelling in the same philosophical, cultural and Jewish circles, there is no sign that they met. Soon after the war broke out in Europe, Levinas found himself in a POW camp at the same time as Arendt was being held in an internment camp. Against all odds, both survived the war – which is more than one can say for most of their friends and families. After the war Levinas returned to France while

Arendt became an American citizen. Both quickly returned to the only means they had to make sense of what had happened – by thinking and writing. In addition, it was after the war that both re-dedicated themselves with vigour to Judaism, although in very different ways. While it seems that their paths diverged from this point on, Arendt defining herself as a political thinker and Levinas as an ethical thinker, there were those –such as Jean Wahl, who saw the resonance in their thought as early as 1947 and chose to include both their writings in his journal. Thus while their ideas crossed paths in the 40's, it was not until a quarter-century later that they themselves met. By this time both had found fame, of sorts. Levinas had finally been welcomed into the French academic circles and had even become a sort of ethical celebrity while Arendt, no stranger to controversy, had become a household name in America, albeit not always an appreciated one. For this reason, in 1970, the Jesuit University of Loyola chose to honour both of these Jewish thinkers with doctorates and it was thus on stage, in Chicago, that they met ... and from all accounts neither was too impressed.

While they were not impressed with each other, I have been profoundly impressed by both their lives and writings. It is for this reason that I chose to engage them in an intellectual dialogue. Given their shared personal, philosophical, and historical backgrounds, one would have thought that a close analysis of the resonances in their respective projects had already been undertaken. To add to this dialogue between Arendt and Levinas, I have also decided to question the predominant reading of Arendt as both a Greek and unethical thinker. In addition, again in relation to Jewish thought, I thought it important to challenge the predominant mode of reading Levinas' so-called confessional writings and his so-called philosophical writings separately. Aware of the difficulty of engaging Jewish thought in philosophical terms, and more specifically political terms, I hope to have shown that such an approach to Levinas is a fruitful one.

Yet, and let me be clear, my goal in this dialogue is not reconcile or compare their thought; this would be both an impossible and uninteresting endeavour. Rather, my goal is to explore the possibility of an approach to the political that is rooted in intersubjectivity and by this means to create a space for an ethics to arise from within the polis. For this I rely on the innovative and intriguing notions of the political, ethics and intersubjectivity put forward by Arendt, Levinas and the Judaic respectively.

By defining the political in Arendtian terms, I begin with a space of inter-action defined by plurality. Yet, as Arendt's notion of the political lacks a 'methodical' reflection on the 'principles' of action, I turn to Levinas to shed some light on this lacuna by means of his ethics of alterity. To further develop this connection between alterity and plurality, I develop the notion of relationality, inspired by the Judaic, connecting it to a phenomenological notion of intersubjectivity.

I take intersubjectivity to be a political principle rooted in hope and an appreciation for the enriching effects of alterity, of the stranger rather than the friend or neighbour. Intersubjectivity thus does not presuppose that one appreciates others because of their similarities to the self but that one comes to understand that difference and responsibility is elevating and humanising. Concretely what this entails is an understanding of the interconnectedness of every human being. Lastly, intersubjectivity is a means to remind us that even without roots one remains rooted in the world by being connected to others.

My hypothesis is that because of the tendency to view the political in terms of singularity, a perspective greatly determined by the priority of ontology in Western thought, a reflection on what is in fact central to the political – the relations between people – has been overlooked.

Methodologically, my thesis combines three approaches.

First, in each part, I dedicate myself to a close textual readings of my three sources in order to put forward my interpretations of their thought and to bring to light what I take to be the import of their work for my project.

Second, I argue for the need for a novel principle for the political – one that embraces plurality and alterity by means of intersubjectivity. Rather than take the route of a normative approach to the political, I have chosen to develop and deepen Arendt's notion of the plurality of the political by means of Levinas' ethics of alterity. While I by no means wish to conflate ethics and politics, as the gap between them is fundamentally necessary, I do believe that both need to be challenged and a dialogue re-opened between these distinct realms. While there is clearly a danger, in contemporary liberalism, of treating politics as the means to apply to certain ethical principles, it is my claim that a greater danger for modern society, one exposed by totalitarianism, is of a complete divorce between the political and the people and that a political landscape devoid of all ethics can lead to both self and world alienation.

Thirdly, in the conclusion, I go beyond Arendt, Levinas and the Judaic taking what I see to be best from each in order to lay the post-foundational 'foundation' for my own project – a political ethics of intersubjectivity.

Now, I'd like to explore each of these three parts more closely.

In part 1, I begin by presenting what I take to be central, and valuable, to Arendt's conception of the political developed in response to her original analysis of totalitarianism. By deconstructing the Nazis' 'method', Arendt identifies the horizontal and vertical aspects of the human realm that were systematically eliminated and highlights the importance of four distinct, yet intertwined, realms: the legal, political, ethical and personal. Her choice to focus on the political arises from the fact that it is the political realm that is, for her, the realm in which humanity can recover its inhumanity. For Arendt, the political is a horizontal space of intersubjective inter-action and is thus much more fragile than the legal, for example, which has a vertical dimension.

I then focus on Arendt's concept of action, in its relation to freedom and power, which I argue are the basis for her understanding of plurality, interpreted as the between which arises from agonistic dialogue. What I am most intrigued by in her interpretation of the political is this notion of intersubjectivity, as the basis for the creation of a shared reality, a creation that requires a plurality of distinct persons and perspectives. I then narrow my reading of Arendt to the relationship between the political and morality by focusing on her writings dealing with judgement and responsibility, both of which also arise from an intersubjective dialogue based on dissensus. Here I argue that dissensus –rooted in the alterity of the other, as opposed to consensus, must underline our understanding of the political. Specifically in the case of Arendt, conflict has the ability to disclose a shared world to those in dialogue yet I do not think this is sufficient for a political realm characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity.

Next, as part of the untold Arendtian story is of the importance of the Judaic in her thought. While she was certainly not a practicing Jew, her life and writings are dedicated to Jewish themes. In addition she worked for Jewish organisations for over 25 years. What I take to be a fundamental argument for exploring the Judaic in her thought is the importance of her call for Jews to recognise the importance of the public and political realm and, in addition, her appreciation for the need to be seen in this realm by those, like the Jews, who have historically been excluded and often persecuted. It is this fundamental connection between the experience of the Jewish people during the Shoah, which philosophical can be expressed by means of the Judaic, and the importance of the notion of humanity for the polis that I seek to bring out.

I conclude part 1 by bringing to light the ethical cleft in Arendt's thought and its potential dangers. Simply put, I use Levinas' ethics as a means to critique Arendt. While I argue that ethics and the political must be respected as two distinct domains, each with their own 'rules', I do believe that it is important for a realm of praxis to embrace certain values regarding the interactions between individuals, power-relations and responsibility.

It is in search of such praxis oriented principles that I turn to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas in part 2. It is also important here to make clear that for Levinas ethics is first and foremost horizontal, there is transcendence in the face-to-face relation. Ethics, as opposed to morality, is thus understood not as another competing conception of the Good but rather a means to discover the goodness that exists in humanity through our relations to the other, relations based, as Levinas argues, on responsibility. Although I respect Levinas', and many of his readers, choice to maintain a distinction between his so-called philosophical writings and his so-called confessional writings, part of the novelty of my project is that I show how these enrich each other and ought not to be read separately even though this raises many problems, which my project cannot avoid, about the role of religion in the political and the role of the Judaic in philosophy.

I first consider Levinas' unique approach to ethics that embraces what Arendt sees as central to the political, its condition of plurality, a plurality based in alterity and its prioritization of the intersubjective relationship that is not defined by the same (that is consensus). What Levinas offers is a penetrating analysis of the intersubjective relationship, in ethical terms, which could possibly 'ground' Arendt's political notion of plurality and enrich the ethical potential of the polis. Given the complexity of Levinas' thought, I dedicate two chapters to a consideration of his critique of Heidegger, to his notion of ethics as first philosophy and the development of his ethics of alterity in relation to the notions of responsibility and justice.

Having considered the 'theoretical' framework with which Levinas is working, I turn to his writings on the political focusing on his writings on Israel, human rights, and the state. One of the claims I put forward in this chapter is that Levinas' notion of justice, inspired by his ethics, shares several critical Arendtian resonances. One noteworthy example is that of human rights. Both Arendt and Levinas recognise the importance of human rights but criticise their foundation in an abstract quality and both promote the importance of responsibility in dialogue with rights. Lastly, I challenge Levinas' account of the politics which is too closely linked to his ethics. It thus fails to maintain a proper appreciation of the distinction between the sphere of the political and the ethical. In this

sense, I now use Arendt to critique Levinas. I also address a rather difficult question regarding the type of response that was needed to totalitarianism. While Levinas sees this as being ethical, in line with the Judaic, Arendt – a maverick in this manner – understood and argued for the need for the Jews to discover the public realm and to act in it. In other words, while his phenomenology of the face-to-face justifies the commandment thou shall not kill, in its ethical form it cannot appear in the political realm - the realm from which totalitarianism arose. By reducing the Shoah to its ethical failure, Levinas – along with many other Jews of his generation – fails to appreciate the importance of the polis for precisely for people such as the Jews who have throughout history been excluded from it. It is however worth noting that it is also because of this exclusion that the Judaic can confront the Western political tradition.

Part 3 is dedicated to the Judaic. In short, I define the Judaic by differentiating it from Judaism, the religion, and from being Jewish, as an ‘identity’. The Judaic is thus restricted to the ‘philosophical’ tradition within Judaism. I further limit my use of this term to the period of modernity when Jews were confronted, for the first time, with the meaning of the choice to believe in the ideals and principles of the Judaic. It is also because of my definition of the term Judaic that I differentiate the Judaic from either a Judeo-Christian approach or a Christian approach. While the former seeks to reconcile the differences between these philosophical and religious traditions, my emphasis is on those differences that may be fruitful for a dialogue with Western politics that has certainly had a closer association with Christianity than with Judaism.

It is for this reason that in my final chapter, I follow a different approach by exploring four elements central to the Judaic that I argue are of political importance for a political ethics of intersubjectivity. These are: hope, relationality, responsibility and education. A central aspect of this claim is on the level of a Judaic philosophical anthropology which is grounded in hope and a notion of transcendence that is horizontal rather than vertical. With hope, rather than fear which I suggest has been a dominant voice in the political since Hobbes and certainly in the aftermath of totalitarianism, I argue that it is possible to conceive of the political as a space for creation and interaction rather than security and protection. It is my claim that the other, while a stranger, need not be interpreted as a threat to the self. In brief, I suggest that hope, may be an appropriate principle with which to inspire the political. Secondly, I develop the importance of relationality, which has ties to the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, as the ‘foundation’ for the political rather than singularity. Thirdly, I consider the importance of prioritising a discourse of responsibility, in addition to that of rights, if either are to have any real political import. Lastly, I develop the central role education has played in creating a virtual Jewish public space.

In the conclusion, I return to consider what can be learned from an intersubjective approach to political ethics. While this does not, to be sure, amount to a comprehensive or normative political doctrine, I hope that it offers a contribution to the political in the form of a distinctive mode or orientation with regard to both thought and action, a contribution that can: 1) create a critical distance from which to consider the political, 2) challenge the assumption that our understanding of the political must arise from either the individual, the citizen, or the group, and 3) point towards a new perspective on the political in light of an intersubjective understanding of the human condition with regard to our responsibility

for others and the shared world. Each of these parts is necessary to ‘found’ and ‘substantiate’ my claim that the political needs to be rethought from the perspective of intersubjectivity, an intersubjectivity that is an ethical principle appropriate to the realm of the political.

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