Between Freedom, Tyranny, and Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss on Preserving the Moral Difference between East and West

The split in today’s world is perceptible even to a hasty glance... These deep manifold splits bear the danger of equally manifold disaster for all of us, in accordance with the ancient truth that a kingdom — in this case, our Earth — divided against itself cannot stand.


The split between Western democratic regimes and Eastern communist regimes defined the era between 1945 and 1989. To public figures and intellectuals during that time, it presented a political philosophical problem, often with existential bearing on the future of civilisation. Two competing conceptions of the political future of humanity shared an uneasy coexistence. But it also presented a disquieting display of how philosophers and public figures behave in a divided world. Between 1945 and 1989, many philosophers and public intellectuals in the West treated the Western democracies and communist bloc as if they were morally and politically equivalent. As the years exposed the oppression that the communist countries perpetuated, the treatment of the West and East as equivalent marks a great failure for political philosophy. The persistent questions for those who reflect on intellectuals from that period, are who managed to escape that failure, and by what means did they escape?

The study of two German émigrés to the United States, Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt, helps address those questions. To counter intellectual errors and grasp rightly the divide between East and West, Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss buttress their call for a revival of political thought and political philosophy through their critique of modernity, by a determination to address adequately the moral and political divide between East and West. Arendt escapes the equivocation between East and West in light of her reflections on historically identifiable totalitarian movements. Strauss escapes by recovering a political philosophy that is capable of identifying the social phenomena associated with tyranny.

Public figures equivocating between western democracy and eastern communism did so for various reasons. Strauss and Arendt are concerned with one particular strand of intellectual failure. These are intellectuals who might be called historico-philosophical pessimists. Their philosophical reflections on the course of modern political and intellectual history leave them deeply unhappy about the whole modern human situation, so that they view East and West as each exemplifying the same unhappy situation. For Arendt and Strauss, the figure who expresses this viewpoint most strongly is their former teacher, Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger and the Crisis of Modernity

A recurring concern in the thought of Martin Heidegger is nihilism, which he thinks defines the crisis of the modern age. Agreeing with Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God as the defining event for modernity, Heidegger takes it to indicate radical historicism: that there is no eternally true foundation for justice or morality. The disquieting possibility from radical historicism is that all moral standards are historically relative. If they are impossible to justify because they are only correct for
a particular historical moment, nihilism reigns. In this atmosphere, a form of the will to power, scientific and technological thinking, attempts to subdue nature and subjugate all mankind to the technological way of thinking. Through Heidegger’s critique of modernity, this technological will to power dominates because of a theoretical, intellectual failure: the forgetting of the question of the meaning of Being. With the misconception of Being going all the way back to Plato, the story of Western civilisation is the descent into nihilism. This nihilism defines both liberal democracies like America and communist regimes like Russia: “from a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same, with the same dreary technological frenzy and the same unrestricted organization of the average man.”

Heidegger’s conclusions about contemporary Western civilisation led him to look for political alternatives to liberal democracy and communism providing an escape from nihilism. So it was that in 1933, he joined the Nazi party. As rector of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger expressed his hopes for a political transformation of Germany and the German university in cooperation with the Nazi party. Although he rapidly came to see Nazism as a similar expression of nihilism, he never repudiated his comments on Nazism’s positive character. Following the Second World War, in his sparse political remarks, Heidegger continued to view Communism and liberal democracy as equally nihilistic, as two forms of the same philosophical crisis, and concentrated his energies away from political reflections to theoretical philosophy.

Responses to Martin Heidegger’s theoretical philosophy varied immensely, as well as responses to his political Nazi sympathies. Some tried to write off Heidegger’s politics as a further example of a philosopher making bad political decisions, and preferred to focus attention on his un-political theoretical philosophy. But for Arendt and Strauss, Heidegger’s theoretical philosophy was related to and culpable for both ignoring politics and making bad political decisions. Doing philosophy so divorced from the study of politics was the problem. To outmanoeuvre Heidegger’s historico-philosophical pessimism, they would have to engage with Heidegger on his own comprehensive terms, and provide a different account of modernity that revealed the perils of neglecting political philosophy.

**Recasting the Crisis of Modernity**

Understanding the contemporary situation properly requires grasping what precisely have gone awry in modernity. Following Heidegger, Arendt and Strauss identify the crisis of modernity as in part an intellectual crisis, which is one driven by the development and decay of philosophical reflection. Each addresses a particular feature of Heidegger’s philosophical stance. For Arendt, the concern is Heidegger as a metaphysician. Metaphysics is the study of the question of Being, and is an expression of the *vita contemplativa*, of a life primarily spent contemplating Being. It is in contradistinction to another form of human life, as it is engaged in doing something: with objects, with other human beings, and with the world. This is the *vita activa*, which crucially implicates the political realm of human existence. Arendt believes that historically, the tradition of philosophy has been interested in contemplation as opposed to action, and so subordinated the *vita activa* as being very much in the second place to the *vita contemplativa*. Consequently, the political realm within which human beings practice the *vita activa* is devalued and frequently disparaged. The political sphere is not examined on its own terms, out of the
reflection on action, so that few, if any, understand what politics is. Human beings reflecting on the present age cannot tell if a vast realm in which so many human lives find meaning, the political realm, really exists.

For Strauss, the crisis of modernity strongly manifests itself in “the crisis of the West,” which consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose.”

Behind this uncertainty of purpose, thinks Strauss, lies the philosophical stance of radical historicism. Heidegger, in assenting to radical historicism, affirms that the ideals of moral truth, ideas of justice and right, are only true for certain historical civilisations. In so doing, he exacerbates the crisis of liberal democracy, for liberal democracy is inextricably linked with the presumed universal rightness and self-evident character of certain rights. With the onset of radical historicism, Western liberal democracies worry that these rights, far from being self-evident, are true only for themselves and not for others. For Strauss, this situation is a political problem of potentially disastrous consequences. The tacit suggestion of a radical historicist philosopher is that political problems, like what is good and right, are not something that can be raised meaningfully, as establishing foundations for them are impossible. So enquiries concerning basic political alternatives, and ultimately how a human being ought to live, are not pursued by philosophy.

The task for Arendt is to, perhaps for the first time in the history of human thinking, to reflect on the *vita activa*, and try to disclose the genuine character of the political sphere and how it is a realm for authentic human meaning. The task for Strauss is to sidestep the contemporary preoccupation with historicism and the worry over how to justify what is right and wrong, to enquire into basic questions of political philosophy. These are available and accessible now in the present age to one thinking carefully. By asking the questions, one assumes the possibility of an answer, and that provides for what is good and right to be meaningfully explored. For both Arendt and Strauss, the crucial philosophical move is to set aside certain baggage in the history of philosophy in order to grasp properly the political experiences of contemporary humanity. The result is that, when it comes to examining the West and East, they do not equivocate or lose sight of the phenomena behind theoretical abstractions. They can then address the political and moral problems prevalent within the Communist bloc by reference to a particular theme.

**The Diagnosis of the Communist East**

For Arendt, the regimes of the communist east are criminal. From the existence of the Gulag concentration camps, to the insatiable hunt for objective enemies, reality exposes the Bolshevik states as totalitarian. It is Arendt’s determination to identify features of totalitarianism, a predominant theme in her work, which permits her to assess the situation correctly. For Arendt, no political event troubles the world so much the onset of totalitarian movements: it is “the predicament of our times.” Yet if it is to be fought and resisted, it must be explained and understood.

Yet theoretical philosophical traditions mar the study of totalitarianism. For example, if we assume theoretically that most of our actions are of a utilitarian nature, then the actions of totalitarian movements make no sense. For Arendt, the one area in particular that manifest this truth is the concentration camp. The paradigm of
understanding evil as “exaggerated self-interest” lends no understanding to the concentration camp. From that point of view, the concentration camp displays a number of irrationalities: punishing completely innocent people, keeping them in a condition where productive work was impossible, frightening and terrorizing an already subdued population, ignoring an military or strategic interest in operating the camps. Neither an explanatory account of slavery, aggressive warfare, a desire for world domination, nor massacre of indigenous populations can adequately account for what takes place under totalitarian regimes. The actions are—unlike those previous categories—unprecedented in human history. Only by grasping with the phenomenon of totalitarianism as it actually presents itself can one adequately expose it.

“Tyranny,” writes Strauss, “is a danger coeval with political life.” As such, any study of politics, any political science, addresses the problem of tyranny. This at least was practice of political science until very recently. In the present, logical positivism in political science, a combination of a commitment to searching for universal laws from quantifiable data as well as a commitment for “value-free” study, has taken over the discipline. Its consequences are politically perilous.

Strauss outlines an all-too-common mode of thinking. The demand for scientific precision requires taking a chaos of data from a host of different political regimes and trying to find some order to it. In order to offer an empirical, quantifiable comparison, one must find what is equally present in all regimes, and use this as a key to understanding the politically significant difference between regimes. For example, one might take liberty and coercion, measure it in various regimes, and come up with a percentage one can then use to rank liberty and coercion in different regimes. Strauss writes, “as political scientists, we must express the political phenomena par excellence, the essential difference or heterogeneity of regimes, in terms of the homogenous elements which pervade all regimes. What is important for us as political sciences is not the politically important.” The new political science, out of its commitment to the paradigm of logical positivism, therefore warps the reality of contemporary politics. “Everyone knows what follows from the demonstration, which presupposes the begging of all important questions, that there is only a difference of degree between liberal democracy and Communism in regard to coercion and freedom.” In short, political science can no longer recognize tyranny. It cannot understand social phenomena.

Strauss’s concern, then, is to be able to recover a practice of political science that can identify properly the social phenomena coalescing around tyranny, and then be capable of identifying communism as tyranny.

The Anxiety for the Future of the West

Through their concentration on identifying totalitarianism and tyranny, and thinking about politics in a way that enables that identification to take place, Arendt and Strauss can deploy poignant criticisms of the Eastern communist countries. If that were their primary intellectual contribution, they might merely be mistaken as patriots for their adopted Western democratic roles. Yet, while holding on to their condemnation of Eastern communism, they launch trenchant criticisms of the Western democracies.

Stemming from her critique of modernity, Arendt’s persistent question is how much of modern political life in liberal democracy is actually political? As noted,
Arendt thinks that the *vita activa* within the political realm, in a realm where one acts in relation to other human beings, discloses genuine human meaning. In the absence of this realm, however, a significant possibility for meaning is also absent, exacerbating the problem of nihilism and the drift toward totalitarianism. For Arendt, what prepares the way for totalitarian movements is that loneliness, “the feeling of not belonging to the world at all” has become the everyday experience of the masses. Since the political realm is about interaction with others, Arendt is saying in effect that mass society, for its lack of a political realm, prepares the way for totalitarianism. In identifying totalitarianism as the “predicament of our times,” Arendt suggests that it can, and does, take root in the West as well.

Strauss’s concern, as noted above, is partially with the development of a “new” political science that makes evaluative judgements about the difference between East and West impossible. From there, it is a short step to the relativism concerning justification of values, meaning that, in a practice similar to radical historicists, the new political science dominating Western universities does not attempt to justify liberal democracy. Strauss accuses it of philosophical narrowness: rather than learning from orthodox democrats or the plethora of anti-democratic thinkers of the past, the new political science simply asserts that no value judgements are rational. “The very complex pros and cons regarding liberal democracy have thus become entirely obliterated by the poorest formalism.” It can therefore offer nothing to those who prefer surrender, which is to say the abandonment of liberal democracy, to war.

According to Strauss, this relativism has an ominous historical past: it is the same strand of relativism that had taken over German philosophy in the 1920s, preparing the way for the end of Weimar liberal democracy in the 30s. So the new political science is ultimately blind to the crisis of present-day liberal democracies, which is that they are no longer certain of what the purpose of liberal democracy is, nor of what reasons justify it. The new political science, says Strauss, “fiddles while Rome burns,” but “it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns.” Hence for Strauss, political science is implicated not just in a battle for methodology, but in a crisis of civilisation. The return to classical political philosophy is meant to show the historical parochialism of the present age, and attempt to draw the present age into both an awareness that Rome, contemporary liberal democracy, burns, and that the mainstream intellectuals are fiddling.

**Conclusion**

Avoiding the errors of Heidegger’s thought and practice, Strauss’s and Arendt’s interest in studying politics kept them focused on the specific problems of their contemporary world, and allowed them to identify the problems of present-day regimes. Their judgement of the evil to be avoided in modern politics, totalitarianism and tyranny, meant that they could offer an action-guiding political philosophy while at the same time avoiding the perils of relativism or radicalism. Moreover, by putting some distance between themselves at the historico-philosophical narratives at play in their age, whether it was communism’s, Heidegger’s, or a liberal progressivism, they could maintain a critical philosophical attitude, and voice their concerns about the various developments of modernity that made them anxious.
There is a practical danger in their approach. Strauss and Arendt can seem at times as if, in critiquing developments in modernity, they are actually critiquing modern liberal democracy. So for those with a certain zeal for liberal democracy, Strauss and Arendt seem like anti-liberal thinkers. As the price for trying to maintain a sophisticated and meaningful critique of both the West and East, they became controversial figures in the West. Nevertheless, for each of them, the space of intellectual freedom possible in liberal democracy was a great privilege, and one that they valued highly. But having been granted that space, they felt they should use it with great responsibility. Although friends and allies of liberal democracy, they did not think that allowed them to become flatterers of liberal democracy. In that ever-examining spirit, they draw us to a deeper reflection on that primordial political philosopher Socrates, and how his example is handed down through the ages.

6 Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 1-3.
8 Ibid., 460.
11 Ibid., 233.
15 Strauss, On Tyranny, 177.
16 Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 475, 478.
18 Strauss, Natural Right and History, 1-2.