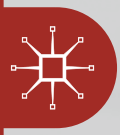

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For William

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About the Author

Karin Fry is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Georgia Southern University. She is the managing editor and founding member of *Arendt Studies*. Her previous publications include *Hannah Arendt: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2009) and *Beyond Religious Right and Secular Left Rhetoric: The Road to Compromise* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). She has research interests in nineteenth- and twentieth-century continental philosophy, political philosophy, philosophy of art, public philosophy, and especially the work of Hannah Arendt.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Hannah Arendt had a remarkable life. As a young Jewish woman, she obtained a PhD in Philosophy prior to the rise of National Socialism in Germany. Having documented Nazi activity for the Zionists, she escaped from Berlin to Paris. There, she helped raise funds for Jewish children to immigrate to Israel. She was interned in France and escaped to the United States. Even though she spoke almost no English upon her arrival, within a couple of years she was published in both German and English. She returned to Germany after the War to help restore art and cultural objects to Jewish families, libraries, and museums. After ten years of American residency, she published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in her new language, which propelled her to fame. She participated in the intellectual discussion surrounding the formation of the state of Israel. She continued to lecture and write, and was pivotal in getting her friends translated and published in English. She taught at several universities and had an academic career, despite avoiding a permanent post until she was nearing retirement. She attended the Adolf Eichmann trial as a correspondent for *The New Yorker* and caused controversy because of her writing. She had numerous contacts in the publishing world and was friendly with many well-known intellectuals, writers, and philosophers. She had a Zelig-like quality of being in the right place at the right time to witness amazing philosophical seminars as well as events of political and historical significance.

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Arendt was trained academically as a philosopher and, over time, specialized in political theory. In philosophical writing, the story of the individual circumstances of one's life is usually put on hold. Fundamental to the discipline of philosophy is the idea that theory stands alone, particularly years ago when Arendt was trained in the field. The life events of an individual were viewed as being not particularly significant to the theory on the page, which must be measured objectively and contested if the arguments were weak. While there were some exceptions to this rule as time has passed, such as Martin Heidegger's decision to join the Nazi party and its implications for his theory, the study of philosophy has often grounded itself in the pursuit of distanced objectivity in isolation from the facts of the writer's life. Though this is changing, traditionally, theory was often viewed in abstract isolation, regardless of the person who wrote it or the historical or cultural circumstances that formed its creation. Typically, the history that mattered in philosophical research was the discussion between the current theorist and what they had read from philosophers of the past. It was as though these thinkers existed in some philosophical universe floating above and in isolation from the world and its events. What mattered more philosophically was which philosophers were read and who informed their academic theories, not how they lived their lives or what daily events they lived through.

Perhaps the greatest example of this more traditional philosophical method was Arendt's fellow Königsberger: Immanuel Kant. Arendt returned again and again to Kant's theory, even though she contested aspects of it, including its ethical universality. Kant believed the same moral rules applied no matter the year, place, or culture. Ethics were universal for all human beings and there were no exceptions to the rule. Certainly, within his theory, there was no need to know the biographical details of the person facing an ethical dilemma because the answer for what the individual should do was the same regardless. Kant's theory was a model of a dispassionate and objective approach to theory in which the theory stood on its own. When contemplating an approach to Kantian theory, no biographical knowledge of its author was necessary, other than to acknowledge what other theories Kant may have read or been influenced by. Amusing anecdotes about Kant exist and are frequently told in the classroom but are not considered to be central to understanding his thought. While stories were told as an aside about an author's life, it was not viewed as integral to the development of a theory. In fact, Kant's sexism and racism, which was littered throughout his work, has been ignored

by some Kant scholars as an instance of Kant violating his own theory and was sometimes not considered to be significant. The categorical imperative was understood to be above all of that. Just as Kant's theory was often understood in isolation from his world and life, so too, the life circumstances of the individual ethical actors were also irrelevant because ethics was based solely upon abstract principles, rather than facts on the ground. In 1926, Alexander Knox White summed up the matter in the following way by stating that the philosopher (who is understood to be masculine)

> attempts to give an account of his facts and problems unbiased by his private feelings and opinions. It is the discipline that he has to undergo in order to become a philosopher. What he is in search of is the Truth, and at his best he regards himself as simply its medium or vehicle. We are therefore doing him no injustice when we judge his theory impersonally or simply as a theory.[1]

Surprisingly, White rejected this idea to some degree, but his view illustrated a prevailing notion throughout the history of philosophy. While there were figures and moments that may have explored the life of a thinker more, such as in the case of Socrates (for which there is no writing), or in the case of some existentialists whose work was focused centrally on the lived human life, there was still a hesitancy about taking this method too far and a need to examine the theory dispassionately, objectively, and without regard for the practical circumstances of its creation. To do otherwise would introduce a risky subjective approach that may cloud the objectivity of the theory.

Arendt discussed this problem directly in *Men in Dark Times* in her *laudatio* to her mentor, Karl Jaspers. She made the point that unlike philosophers who understand their craft as being done in solitude and concerned with abstract universal truths, Jaspers approached things differently. Jaspers thought that philosophy was most importantly communication among people. This could happen even if one's interlocutor was no longer living. What was important was that a different point of view was expressed. Arendt stated that it was essential for Jaspers to "abandon the chronological order hollowed by tradition, in which there appeared to be a

[1] Alexander Knox White, "The Philosophical Significance of Biography," *Journal of Philosophical Studies* 1, no. 4 (1926): 481.

succession, a consistent sequence with one philosopher handing the truth on to the next."[2] Jaspers turned the temporal sequence into a spatial juxtaposition in which

> the nearness and distance depend no longer on the centuries which separate us from a philosopher, but exclusively on the freely chosen point from which we enter this realm of the spirit, which will endure and expand as long as there are men on the earth.[3]

For Jaspers, philosophy was for everyone, and he did not present the canon as a sequential discussion, but as past and present lives communicating together in a living discussion to gain insight and meaning concerning the world. Breathing life back into the philosophical canon was important to Jaspers and important to Arendt as well. The life stories of individuals were relevant in this task by connecting the theory to the world and the context from which it arose. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt stated that we know more about *who* Socrates was more so than Plato or Aristotle, even though Socrates did not write his philosophy down and Plato and Aristotle did. She stated: "we know much better and more intimately who he was, because we know his story," which she contrasted to Aristotle, whose scholarly work was well known, but only told us what he produced.[4] To know the significance of "who" someone was to be aware of the story. In fact, Arendt's first work after her dissertation, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, had some philosophical conclusions, but only through connecting them directly to Rahel's life experience. In this work, Arendt focused directly on the biographical story as her starting place. The theoretical conclusions connect to the world by grounding them in Rahel's story and experiences.

Following Arendt's lead, I have found that researching the life of a thinker like Hannah Arendt, the documentary, biographical, and historical evidence of Arendt's life and times, or the fragments of it that have remained, provide insight into her overall theory and in different ways than was typically understood. Moreover, the various gaps and absences are meaningful, particularly since she believed that archiving material was so important and maintained an extensive archive of her own work. In

[2] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 79.
[3] Ibid., 79–80.
[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

taking the life events of Arendt's world more seriously, I am not trying to do a psychoanalysis of Arendt, which is a methodology that Arendt rejected. Nor am I trying to suggest that her life impacted her theory in ways in which she was not aware. Furthermore, in a superficial way, Arendt's life, like the fact that she was a Jewish refugee and that fact that she was romantically involved with Martin Heidegger was often referred to by scholars when understanding her theory. Yet, a deeper analysis of the overall biographical and historical facts of authors' lives could be used to glean even greater insight into most philosophical texts, not just Arendt's. Philosophical texts are not written in isolation from the world in which they were created. Viewing philosophical texts ahistorically and impersonally as if they were created in a vacuum can be misleading, particularly when dealing with political theory. Theory can be explored dispassionately and impersonally to delve vigorously into the arguments at play, but it can also be examined in light of the historical evidence and archive, which may produce equally important results.

At a conference when I presented a portion of this work, I was asked whether what I was doing was philosophy. From a typical understanding of the profession, I suppose it is not considered to be philosophy except for any arguments that I propose from the evidence gathered. However, if philosophy concerns the search for truth and accuracy of arguments, it seems useful to connect and inform theory with personal and historical data to have a greater understanding of what the person who wrote the theory meant, and why certain topics were of interest, and why others were not. I am not suggesting that all philosophy must occur this way and that there is no use for the traditional approach. Merely, I am suggesting that sometimes the archival evidence can help readers gain insight into the various theories in unexpected and significant ways. While philosophers may have read a biography of someone in their specialty, usually, its significance was relegated to the background and was viewed as being supplementary. In this text, it is the exploration of Arendt's life that will provide the central clues for insights into Arendt's theory.

It is true that Arendt's biographical story has been examined thoroughly, perhaps more so than most theorists. There are several biographies, films, plays, and even a graphic novel that explore the extraordinary events of her life. Yet, most of the conclusions drawn from these events have been very straightforward connections. Her experiences as an immigrant, a refugee, and someone fleeing Nazi Germany clearly impacted her interest in exploring totalitarianism and politics in her theory. Her

relationship with Martin Heidegger has also been investigated intensely to understand his philosophical influence, but also, whether Arendt was correct in forgiving him. These issues are important but well worn. In this volume, I make conclusions related to her life story in areas that have not been investigated extensively. Typically, each chapter begins with a biographical exploration followed by a discussion of how it affects her theory.

Chapter 2 describes a new approach by exploring Arendt's life and its relationship to her theory. I examine the moments within Arendt's own thought that took a similar view and moved the biographical and historical data to the fore. In works like *Rahel Varnhagen* and *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt rejected the traditional philosophical method that focused on ideas alone. She brought in biographical, archival, literary, and cultural influences that inspired some of the later theoretical claims in these works. This chapter also discusses Arendt's theory of storytelling, how it related to history, and how historical and cultural forces affected one's life in Arendt's view. I conclude that there is some justification for using a similar methodological approach to Arendt's work, given that she used it herself at times.

Chapter 3 examines remembering and the role of the archive in preserving and documenting lives by contributing to the fragmentary, individual narratives of history. I compare Arendt's theory to her friend, Walter Benjamin's, and consider the role of the archive in remembering and recapturing experience in both their projects. Arendt emphasized capturing the narrative of an individual life story, while Benjamin focused on collecting individual material objects. Despite their differing foci, they largely agreed about what constituted history during modernity, which they considered to be broken. They played key roles in archiving each other's work and saw archiving as a political and historical task that allowed individuals, material objects, and experiences to be remembered.

While Chap. 3 concerns remembering, Chap. 4 concerns forgetting and the biographical and historical instances that are missing from Arendt's archive that she did not discuss publicly. The destruction of her hometown, Königsberg, and her days within the Gurs internment camp were some key events that make virtually no appearance in the archive. Even though archiving and telling narratives was important to Arendt, there were some events for which there were no words.

Chapter 5 uses resources from personal letters to challenge the view that Arendt was overwhelmingly influenced by Martin Heidegger, and not as influenced by Karl Jaspers. This provides one example in which the

biographical archive can highlight facts in a new way, leading to new insights about Arendt's philosophical influences as well as her influence upon other thinkers. I also suggest that the typical way of understanding philosophical influence is mistaken, particularly when it comes to women thinkers, by not addressing evidence of facts on the ground and how thinkers influence one another.

In Chap. 6, I discuss Arendt's refrain from political action and the fact that one of her reasons for not participating politically was that she rarely joined political groups. I contrast this with Arendt's interpretations of the category of political action as an individual agonistic act or as a discursive or communicative act. I argue that the possibilities for political action for Arendt are broader, involving a variety of types of action based on the circumstances, which included cause-oriented collective action involving group membership as an example.

The seventh chapter examines Arendt's statements about her own identity and how she urged that if one is attacked as a Jew, one should fight back as one. Despite these claims, Arendt's work is often understood as excluding all issues of identity politics as social and not political. Refraining from judgment about whether this is an effective political strategy, I argue that identity politics issues could be public and political for Arendt and were not always relegated to the social. It was possible for political groups to form that focused on identity issues.

The last chapter investigates Arendt's description of her experience as an immigrant in "We Refugees," and notes the ambivalence she felt between acting politically and the desire to assimilate to gain safety. I relate this personal experience to the controversies surrounding Arendt's work from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and her essay on Little Rock. These controversies connect to how Arendt understood what authentic political action was for oppressed minorities. Unfortunately, she ignored her own experiences as a stateless person when making some of these claims and, especially in the Little Rock essay, lacked narratives and experiences in which to ground her claims. I conclude that Arendt is rightly criticized for looking at identity questions through the lens of authentic political action and that she was unable to see multiple possibilities for action connected to these issues. Yet, her work continues to provide resources for addressing some of these issues, despite her failings.

Clearly, Arendt had more traditional writings that focused exclusively upon theory and did not delve into the culture or history of individual lives. Prioritizing the life story and historical circumstances of Arendt's life

is a method that has its dangers. First, it may betray her theory to bring private issues into the discussion about her public, academic work. Second, it is difficult to follow the academic "rules" of reliability and objectivity when dealing with individual life events that are difficult to describe and fully comprehend. Yet, just because this is a difficult task does not mean it is not worthwhile. Understanding the biographical and historical circumstances of Arendt's life can shed light on her theory in a way that has been largely ignored. Unlike Arendt, who sought to tell the story of Rahel Varnhagen as she might have told it, I make no claims to be able to do such a thing. However, by examining Arendt's life and recounting biographical details that may have been obscured, I draw new conclusions based upon a different kind of evidence.

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CHAPTER 2

Life and Theory

Hannah Arendt's approach to theory is difficult to classify. Though most of her written works concerned topics in political theory or philosophy and fit into those genres, there were other works like *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that crossed disciplinary lines and used historical and political science approaches among others. Furthermore, her books *Rahel Varnhagen* and *Men in Dark Times* were largely biographical. Arendt did not have an interest in discussing methodology, though her work clearly crossed methodological boundaries at times.[1] Complicating the issue further, Arendt famously denied being called a philosopher and preferred to be called a political theorist. In her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, she claimed: "In my opinion I have said good-bye to philosophy once and for all. As you know, I studied philosophy, but that does not mean I stayed with it."[2] Her reasons for this disavowal had partly to do with the fact that she often worked as a lecturer in political science departments, but also concerned what she perceived as the uneasy relationship between

[1] Ernst Vollrath, "Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking," *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977):162.

[2] Hannah Arendt. *The Portable Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (USA: Penguin Books, 2000), 3–4.

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philosophical theory and politics.[3] The typical philosophical approach to politics denied that people could legitimately disagree, and it treated politics as something that was as predictable and universal as the factual information of science. This was tyrannical for Arendt, rather than democratic, by failing to acknowledge a plurality of valid viewpoints. Additionally, Arendt believed that many philosophers, including Heidegger, failed to question and criticize the National Socialist regime. During the Second World War, Arendt felt the collaborating philosophers had

> made up ideas about Hitler, in part terrifically interesting things! Completely fantastic and interesting and complicated things! Things far above the ordinary level! I found that grotesque. Today I would say that they were trapped by their own ideas.[4]

Arendt concluded that she wanted "nothing to do with that lot," and spent several years outside of academia altogether.[5] Over time, Arendt transitioned back into academia, taught courses at a variety of universities, and wrote several books on political theory. She sought to avoid the problems of the tradition of philosophy by focusing on the importance of plurality, free discussion, and legitimate disagreement.

Despite her disavowal of the field, a tension remained with Arendt's denial of the label "philosopher," and the fact that most of her work was classified as "philosophy." Arendt's graduate training and most of her writings betrayed how seriously she took philosophy and how its concerns were important to her. In a letter to Gershom Scholem when she denied coming from Leftist politics, she admitted that "if I hailed from anywhere

[3] Arendt's article "Philosophy and Politics" provides a potential motive for her rejecting the title of "philosopher." Arendt rejected the title of "philosopher," but considered herself to be a political theorist, because she did not advocate that the philosopher's truth should dominate the political realm. For Arendt, politics concerned plurality and the legitimate different opinions between people depending upon their differing situations in the world. Arendt saw tyrannical and non-democratic tendencies in universal philosophical theory that did not tolerate differing opinions. Therefore, Arendt may have abandoned the title of philosopher to critique its traditional approach to politics (Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73–103).

[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Arendt*, 12.

[5] Ibid., 11.

at all, it is from German philosophy."[6] In her courses and throughout her academic books, she taught and wrote far more about philosophical texts than any other subject. Often, she reconstructed the philosophical history of a particular concept of interest as a starting point. In fact, when she approached any problem, she claimed to make distinctions in much the same way as Aristotle did.[7] She complained that in the fields of history and political science, there was a "growing incapacity for making distinctions," that was problematic and that certain political terms like totalitarianism, nationalism, and imperialism were effectively meaningless because of their indiscriminate usage.[8] In a way, many of her writings concerned trying to work out the ways philosophy was or was not compatible with politics and she sought to find a new approach to theory that allowed us to "think what we are doing."[9] Arendt did not reject theory altogether and her philosophical training remained with her throughout her career. Today, Arendt's work is understood to be part of the philosophical canon despite her ambiguous relationship to it. Her training and her general approach have been understood to be philosophical.

Yet, unlike traditional philosophers, Arendt often took the biographical and historical circumstances of life much more seriously than others trained in the field. Particularly, in *Rahel Varnhagen* and *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt dwelled on the life stories of her subjects. Rather than viewing these details as subjective, extraneous, or meaningless to the overall study, Arendt valued the insights she gleaned from the life stories of individuals. This suggested that she might support a methodology that examined the circumstances of her own life in a similar way to gain insight into her theory. Admittedly, this is a somewhat speculative conclusion. However, in this chapter, I will discuss the areas of Arendt's work that closely connect to the biographical in order to show that Arendt's examination of biography and the historical circumstances of life was intentional and had a profound relationship to her overall method, including some of her theoretical conclusions. For Arendt, sometimes political and historical conclusions were better understood when connected to the

[6] Hannah Arendt to Gershom Scholem, July 20, 1963, in *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, ed. Marie Luise Knott, trans. Anthony David (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 206.

[7] Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 337–338.

[8] Hannah Arendt, *Portable Arendt,* 162.

[9] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.