

Modernity's Paradoxical Celebration and Destruction of the "Person"
Grant Havers, Trinity Western University (havers@twu.ca)

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Hannah Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "Man of the twentieth century has become just as emancipated from nature as eighteenth-century man was from history." This twofold emancipation has bred the most liberating and oppressive ideas within late modernity. The modern idea of the "person," as David Walsh shows in *The Priority of the Person*, is irreducible to nature and history. The modern philosophy of freedom not only enabled the idea of the "person," it also delegitimized any deterministic force (natural or historical) that stood in the way of freedom's advance. Paradoxically, the demotion of nature and history's erstwhile authority also enabled the rise of the totalitarian regime that, as Arendt argued, seeks to destroy the person by erasing both nature and history. Does the modern philosophy of freedom at the heart of personhood have sufficient strength to combat the totalitarian temptation to destroy personhood altogether? I address this question by drawing on the insights contained within Arendt and Walsh's distinct treatments of modernity's promise and dangers.

David Walsh in his *The Priority of the Person* (2020)¹ persuasively shows that the modern tradition of philosophy is best suited to answer the question: What is a person? Walsh writes, “each person “as unique, irreplaceable, and incommunicable, knowable only in him- or herself and not in anything else.” (*POP*, 19) To be sure, this tradition—including Kant, Rawls, the personalists, and many others—has never provided a complete answer. The “person” is still “the missing category within the history of thought, the person who thinks is a decided latecomer to his or her own self-understanding. What we need to preserve the inexpressible dignity of persons is most impressed upon us as what we most need.” (*POP*, ix) Despite the incomplete nature of the attempt to understand the person, Walsh gives full credit to liberal modernity for articulating what we understand about personhood at this point in history. Although liberalism “has drifted through ever-more incoherent evocations of its own foundations to finally reach the point at which it has turned its back on the project as such” (*POP*, 63), “the centrality of persons” is “at the core of liberal political thought.” (*POP*, 320)

¹ David Walsh, *The Priority of the Person: Political, Philosophical, and Historical Discoveries* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020). Henceforth cited as *POP* in the text.

The issues and questions that Walsh raises in his study are pivotal to a proper understanding of the person. He persuasively shows throughout his ambitious study that philosophy, despite its limitations, is essential for this understanding, even though liberal defenders of the person's dignity may not be fully aware of their debt to this philosophical tradition. Still, there are two practical questions that need more elaboration in this presentation. First, *who* exactly defines what personhood is in liberal modernity? Second, does the philosophy of liberal modernity have any influence on this authority, apart from providing a useful language? In order to answer these two questions, I shall discuss how Hannah Arendt's famous study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)² forcibly challenges the idea that the philosophy of liberalism is the real authority behind a conventional understanding of personhood. The troubling message that Arendt reveals is that the liberal language of personhood can be deployed by totalitarian elements even within a democracy.

In offering this interpretation, I do not want to suggest that Arendt identified liberalism with totalitarianism. In her exchange with Eric Voegelin on her study, she emphatically stated that "liberals are clearly not

² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces (Harcourt, 1979). Henceforth cited as *OT* in the text.

totalitarians. This, of course, does not exclude the fact that liberal or positivistic elements also lend themselves to totalitarian thinking; but such affinities would only mean that one has to draw even sharper distinctions because of the fact that liberals are not totalitarians.”³ The fact that she referred to philosophical “elements” from the eighteenth century that “crystallize into totalitarianism” does not mean that these elements were inherently totalitarian.⁴ Still, it would be equally imprudent to deny that there is any connection between certain modern ideas and totalitarianism, a connection that appears at times within liberal democracy?

The answer to this question reveals a convergence of Arendt and Walsh’s interpretations of liberal modernity. In brief, they agree that the modern philosophy of liberalism rejects the authority of both nature and history in order to enable an authentic understanding of personhood. This “authority” refers to a deterministic understanding of nature and history, which conflicts with modern freedom. With the Declaration of the Rights of Man during the French Revolution, humanity, not nature or custom, became the basis of these rights. This Declaration “meant nothing more nor less than that from then on Man, and not God’s command or the customs of history,

³ Hannah Arendt, “*The Origins of Totalitarianism: A Reply*,” *Review of Politics* 15/1 (January 1953): 80.

⁴ Arendt, “A Reply,” 81.

should be the source of Law.” (*OT*, 290) Moreover, “Man appeared as the only sovereign in matters of law as the people was proclaimed the only sovereign in matters of government.” (*OT*, 291) This was a fateful development given the implication that ‘man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people.’ In short, “it gradually became self-evident that the people, and not the individual, was the image of man.” (*OT*, 291) This “people” always referred to the citizens of a nation-state.

It is little wonder that Arendt doubted the efficacy of abstract appeals to humanity as a foundation that replaced nature and history. She writes:

Man of the twentieth century has become just as emancipated from nature as eighteenth-century man was from history. History and nature have become equally alien to us, namely, in the sense that the essence of man can no longer be comprehended in terms of either category.... This new situation, in which ‘humanity’ has in effect assumed the role formerly ascribed to nature or history, would mean in this context that the right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself. It is by no means certain whether this is possible. (*OT*, 298)

Arendt doubts that appeals to “humanity” in the abstract can be the basis for human rights precisely because this would require a revolution in international law, “which still operates in terms of reciprocal agreements and treaties between sovereign states; and, for the time being, a sphere that is above the nations does not exist.” (*OT*, 298) In other words, only a nation-

state (or a collection of nation-states) can protect and actualize one of the most important elements of modern personhood—the “right of every individual to belong to humanity.” (*OT*, 298)

Like Arendt, Walsh believes that nature in the pre-eighteenth century sense is no longer a legitimate basis for personhood. In *The Priority of the Person*, he writes: “Not only can nature no longer provide a guide when we subject it to universal dominion, but even the coherence of nature as a concept begins to fall apart...Nothing is simply given as a fixed or permanent nature; everything is drawn into the process of transformation.” (*POP*, 155) Simple appeals to custom or history will not do either. History does not swallow up the person, as he forcibly argues in his chapter on Solzhenitsyn’s *Red Wheel*. “History itself is thereby transformed so that it is not simply the whirring buzzing confusion experienced by the participants as they are trampled to death by mobs or forced to flee from palaces their families had occupied however.” (*POP*, 250) These participants are not mere pawns of history, for they “too bear witness to the realization that they are not simply in history but are also somehow always outside of it...History is in this sense a ceaseless quest for the moment in which history is transcended.” (*POP*, 250) Put differently, neither nature nor history should

be a pretext for bad faith, the temptation to avoid responsibility for the person's exercise of her freedom.

It should be clear that Walsh welcomes the demotion of nature and history from their premodern perches more so than Arendt does, even though neither philosopher believes that their authority is retrievable. Unlike Arendt, Walsh is also certain that the ontological status of the person in modernity can never disappear precisely because its existence is “the inexhaustible source of reflection itself. Nothing in reality can account for them because they are the possibility of explanation.” (*POP*, 207) What Walsh refers to as “transcendence” or the ground of personhood itself rejects the impossibility of persons transcending the dead hand of nature and history. (*POP*, 212)

Although I agree with Walsh's thesis that an idea of personhood is indispensable to ethical praxis, the Arendtian question remains: *who* exactly defines what personhood is? As we have seen, Arendt believes that this task falls to the “people” within a democracy. This answer raises another question: who are the “people?” The rise of mass society and bureaucratic rule in modernity, in her judgment, do not create a people or citizenry that necessarily desires free participation in government. This citizenry does not participate in the realms of “action” and “speech,” which Arendt associates

with the life of politics. Bureaucratic rule by its very nature is the exercise of power in the hands of experts, not the people. “In governments by bureaucracy decrees appear in their naked purity as though they were no longer issued by powerful men but were the incarnation of power itself and the administrator only its accidental agent. There are no general principles which simple reason can understand behind the decree, but ever-changing circumstances which only an expert can know in detail.” (*OT*, 244)⁵

As readers of *Origins* well know, Arendt contends that bureaucratic “rule by nobody” is a precondition for totalitarian rule. In fact, the destruction of the person goes hand in hand with this mode of governance. Towards the end of her study, she observes that this regime requires “the murder of the moral person in man.” (*OT*, 451) Terror and bureaucratic rule are the conditions “under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible.” (*OT*, 452) Earlier in this penultimate chapter, Arendt does not refrain from blaming a democratic citizenry for its complicity, nor does she spare the tradition of Enlightenment universalism for failing to counter this type of rule.

The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses. The impetus and what is more important, the

⁵ As Arendt notes, this lack of principle does not mean that the use of ideology is absent as well. “At the basis of bureaucracy as a form of government...lies this superstition of a possible and magic identification of man with the forces of history.” (*OT*, 216)

silent consent to such unprecedented conditions are the products of those events which in a period of political disintegration suddenly and unexpectedly made hundreds of thousands of human beings homeless, stateless, outlawed and unwanted, while millions of human beings were made economically superfluous and socially burdensome by unemployment. This in turn could only happen because the Rights of Man, which had never been philosophically established but merely formulated, which had never been politically secured but merely proclaimed, have, in their traditional form, lost all validity. (*OT*, 447)

All of these facts are preconditions to the murder of personhood: the “first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man.” (*OT*, 447)

Are these practices unique to totalitarianism? Arendt’s answer is a sobering one. In *The Human Condition*, she emphasizes how modern mass society, including democracy, is governed by “the rule by nobody.” This type of rule refers to bureaucracy, “the last stage of government in the nation-state just as one-man rule in benevolent despotism and absolutism was its first.”⁶ She further warns that “the rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions.” (*HC*, 37) Arendt leaves no doubt that, in her judgment, bureaucratic rule renders the idea of free self-government meaningless:

What we traditionally call state and government gives place here to pure administration—a state of affairs which Marx rightly predicted as the “withering away of the state,” though he was wrong in assuming that only a revolution could bring it about, and even

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 37. Henceforth cited as *HC* in the text.

more wrong when he believed that this complete victory of society would mean the eventual emergence of the “realm of freedom.” (*HC*, 41)

Taken together, these passages reveal Arendt’s overall position that bureaucratic rule even within a democracy can tyrannically invalidate the value of personhood, along with conscience and individuality. What is even more disturbing is the implication that the majority of citizens in a democracy may give their “silent consent” (*OT*, 447) to attacks on the idea of personhood and its inherent dignity. Although she does not employ the term “democratic totalitarianism,” her analysis is compatible with that of James Burnham, who did employ this term. In *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (1943), Burnham juxtaposed democratic totalitarianism to a free regime that encourages “mutual check and balance that is able to chain power.” A regime that practices democratic totalitarianism cannot tolerate any serious opposition or dissent that checks its power. After all, this dissent counters the will of the “people.” Burnham writes:

Democracy is the supremacy of the people. Therefore, democracy is the supremacy of the state. Whenever the state absorbs another phase of social life, that is a victory for democracy.... Today the advance of the managerial revolution is everywhere concentrating economic power in the state apparatus, where it tends to unite with control over the other great social forces—the army, education, labor, law, the political bureaucracy, art, and science even. This development, too, tends to destroy the basis for those social oppositions that keep freedom alive.⁷

⁷ James Burnham, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (John Day, 1943), 249, 251.

What Burnham calls the “managerial revolution” here is no different from the rule by “experts” to which Arendt refers. Although this revolution has totalitarian features, it is also democratic precisely because it achieves the goal of winning democratic consent, albeit through the means of pleasant-sounding propaganda about “the supremacy of the people.”

Can the idea of personhood survive within a liberal democracy, albeit one with a strong strain of bureaucratic rule? In order to answer this question, it is important to credit Arendt with a stronger appreciation of the threat that corporate—not just statist—power poses. This is not a threat that Burnham took as seriously, given his assumption that the state dominated the economic system. (Perhaps this was a reasonable assumption in 1943.) As she argues in both *Origins* and *The Human Condition*, a capitalist economic system is just as tyrannical and destructive as a statist one. With a nod to Marx, Arendt notes that the ruination of the lower middle class or “petty bourgeoisie” under advanced capitalism led its members “to clamor for the ‘welfare state,’ which they expected not only to shield them against emergencies but to keep them in the professions and callings they had inherited from their families.” (*OT*, 36) This attempt at survival may be futile, however, given the fact that a capitalist system will always privilege

growth or productivity over tradition and statist intervention. “It is not an invention of Karl Marx but actually in the very nature of this society itself that privacy in every sense can only hinder the development of social ‘productivity’ and that consideration of private ownership therefore should be overruled in favor of the ever-increasing process of social wealth.” (*HC*, 59-60)

It is safe to surmise from these observations that capitalism, particularly its most bureaucratic or corporate manifestation, is just as impersonal and intrusive as any statist bureaucracy. The “rule by nobody” is equally prevalent precisely because capitalism, by its very nature, liquidates classes and institutions that it once brought into being. There is nothing personal about this process. Can a liberal democracy, though, restrain this system? Walsh argues that the state has proven that it can do so, that capitalism has not yet eradicated the idea of personhood that it helped to bring into being with the inception of bourgeois rule in the eighteenth century. Under liberal democracy, “the individual really is the whole...Persons cannot exchange a part of themselves; they can only give themselves wholly to one another. This is why no economy can apply.” (*POP*, 99) The fact that liberal democracy has a capitalist economy need not provoke undue anxiety about the survival of personhood along with

attendant qualities such as privacy, freedom, individuality, and dignity.

“Within a world in which everything is subsumed in the relentless coordination of means and ends, persons alone stand outside of the demand for rational efficiency. They cannot be commodified. Nor can they be sacrificed for the sake of the greater social good, for each is a whole that outweighs the whole.” (*POP*, 192)⁸ Citizens of liberal democracies can count on their state to reward their loyalty, an attitude that no corporation can encourage in its stakeholders. “Yet even the smallest state can summon the loyalty of citizens not yet present in time. There will always be an Iceland, but the same could not be said for Lehman Brothers.” (*POP*, 313)

Markets dare not ignore these truths:

There is no incompatibility between the political and the economic because the economic already points toward the political. Markets are only apparently constituted by a privileging of private decisions. Their reality is that they constitute a public order...The logic of markets is that they are sustained by what is not reducible to the terms of the market. (*POP*, 308)

Yet Walsh also concedes at times that this arrangement of power and responsibility within liberal democracy is by no means guaranteed. Why? Because the technological imperative at the heart of capitalism (shades of Arendt on “social productivity”) threatens to upend this ordered liberty.

⁸ Walsh also writes: “Calculations about need and interest are only possible because we are not simply reducible to need and interest.” (*POP*, 321)

Walsh appropriately points to the threats posed by the biotechnology industry:

The issue that raises a crisis in principle for liberal democracy is the expanding possibility of biotechnological control over human beings. Again, the issue is presumptively framed within the rights of private liberty, but the implications raise unsettling questions as to the very meaning of liberty. Does it extend to the exercise of control over the genetic endowments of other human beings? In the name of whose liberty are such interventions undertaken. Can there be a right to procure a clone of oneself? If not, on what basis is such a choice prohibited? And what about the permissibility of therapeutic cloning attended to promote the health of the fully present human being? Such are the questions that loom before us, and a resolution is crucially dependent on the recognition of their convergence on the inviolability of the person enshrined at the heart of our constitutional tradition. (*POP*, 66)

What is perhaps even more disturbing than this set of questions is the implication that liberal democratic capitalism cannot easily address them. Indeed, this type of regime may even generate the desire for a genetically constructed person. As we have seen Arendt argue, neither nature nor history restrains the modern exercise of freedom. Liberalism can easily frame a defense of this desire in the name of “rights” and “private liberty.” From a capitalist perspective, the reconstruction of personhood along with human nature is just the next frontier for maximizing profit. In bureaucratic terms, personhood should not interfere with administrative efficiency. Even a democratic argument in favor of leveling genetic differences between people is foreseeable as well. The democratic intolerance for “natural inequality,” which, as Arendt warns, seeks to eliminate all differences, may rear its ugly

head with a vengeance. (*OT*, 54, 234)⁹ What she appropriately calls the modern determination “to act into nature” fits liberal democracy about as well as any other modern regime. (*HC*, 207)¹⁰ The fact that it can employ propaganda, not terror, achieve this aim is all the more sobering.

Can liberal democracy rely on intellectual or spiritual resources that resist this totalitarian onslaught? Walsh relies on the Christian tradition as a bulwark against the most corrosive effects of modernity. “Without the Christian illumination of the transcendent worth of each human being, it would be impossible to conceive the inexhaustible dignity of each individual. Nothing in the world of mundane calculation can explain why human beings alone should escape the logic of instrumentalization.” (*POP*, 37)

Although I agree with this perspective, there are two problems with it. First, as Arendt argues, the doctrine of charity that is at the heart of the Christian account of the person exists in severe tension with the political realm. Even if she overstated the “worldlessness” that once informed Christian charity, Arendt believes that it is perfectly consistent for Christians

⁹ See also *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, by the President’s Council on Bioethics, foreword by Leon R. Kass (New York: ReganBooks, 2003), 152.

¹⁰ See also *OT*, 347.

to create their own public realm, separate from the world to practice charity. (*HC*, 48-9) In short, Christians could realistically conclude that every political regime is so corrupt and hell-bound that it is best to withdraw from politics altogether.

Second, at best liberal democracies no longer even pay lip-service to a Christian heritage. At worst, they often vilify and demonize this legacy as oppressive and genocidal. To recall Arendt, this context may simply remind Christians that politics is not the place to practice charity. This may be a defensible option as long as liberal democracy veers towards embracing the preconditions of totalitarian rule. In the meantime, can the idea of personhood survive liberal democracy?

