

Response to Politics and Truth

Aram Terzian

After reading Politics and Truth several times, viewing the YouTube summary, reviewing the history of Eichmann in Jerusalem, reading several articles related to Relativism, and considering the situation we presently find ourselves in as a country, I look forward to a discussion of Arendt's article.

In terms of her coverage of the Eichmann trial, she portrays herself as a person searching for the truth and rising above the politics of the times. She sees herself as modeling Homeric Impartiality inferring from her statement; "I think it can be traced to the moment when Homer chose to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans, and to praise the glory of Hector, the foe and the defeated man, no less than the glory of Achilles, the hero of his kinfolk. This had happened nowhere before; no other civilization, however splendid, had been able to look with equal eyes upon friend and foe, upon success and defeat." Despite all the calls for the execution of Eichmann and the common belief he was a monster, she posited the idea that he was a simple man only following orders. "Arendt found Eichmann an ordinary, rather bland, bureaucrat, who in her words, was 'neither perverted nor sadistic', but 'terrifyingly normal'. He acted without any motive other than to diligently advance his career in the Nazi bureaucracy. Eichmann was not an amoral monster, she concluded in her study of the case, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Instead, he performed evil deeds without evil intentions, a fact connected to his 'thoughtlessness', a disengagement from the reality of his evil acts. Eichmann 'never realised what he was doing' due to an 'inability... to think from the standpoint of somebody else'. Lacking this particular cognitive ability, he 'commit[ted] crimes under circumstances that made it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he [was] doing wrong'." <https://aeon.co/ideas/what-did-hannah-arendt-really-mean-by-the-banality-of-evil>

She places herself in the role of a reporter seeking truth through objectivity and rational thinking as part of her identification as being the type of person we can rely on in society when the need for factual information is an imperative. "Outstanding among the existential modes of truth telling are the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and the judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter." She sets a rather high bar for herself as a reporter seeking the truth by avoiding interfering directly with human affairs and not speaking the language of persuasion. She seems to imply that there is "truth" out there in the universe and by engaging in certain behaviors and interactions and using certain methodologies, one gets closer to finding out truth. "Socrates and Plato may be willing to concede that human understanding, in this life at least, is very limited, but they do not doubt the existence of an ideal vantage point from which the objective truth about the world could be known. Also, Aristotle appears fairly confident that such a vantage point is accessible to human reason properly employed." <https://iep.utm.edu/cog-rel/>

But what if truth is an illusion held in the eye of the beholder? What if all our seemingly careful search for the truth is loaded with value judgments in the minds of those seeking truth. “Hegel, while upholding a concept of ‘absolute knowledge’, allows every stage that human consciousness has passed through in the historical development of civilization to express an outlook that is true in a partial way. Marx highlights the influence of the mode of production along with class and economic interests in shaping the way people understand their world; and although he appears to recognize the epistemic authority of science in some areas, he rejects the idea of a neutral standpoint from which to adjudicate between different views of social reality. Nietzsche is explicitly relativistic about both moral values and truth, preferring to evaluate claims according to what sort of will to power the claims express rather than according to their objective truth-value.” <https://iep.utm.edu/cog-rel/>

Nineteenth and 20th century thinkers develop several theories of Cognitive Relativism. While differing on specifics they all have two common claims:

- “1) The truth-value of any statement is always relative to some particular standpoint;
- (2) No standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others.” <https://iep.utm.edu/cog-rel/>

This strikes me that I should be skeptical that Arendt, despite her goodwill, can truly be objective in her search for the truth, without considering her values and overall life perspective. Nevertheless, although the fair-minded researcher or reporter will have values they cannot control while making observations, I am more inclined to be influenced by their careful and systematic perspectives than common political discourse with its intent to persuade and propagandize.

She also raises the question of what happens in a society when the search for truth is outpaced by the need for biased political narratives. In this modern age of information fabrication, persuasion and manipulation, where so many individuals have identified with the narratives of political leaders, I have to wonder about Arendt’s statement : “Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strength of its own: whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable to discover or invent a viable substitute for it. Persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it.” Are we now in the beginning stages of actually replacing truth? Has truth become a matter of opinion? Is this what is happening?