

# Alienation, Community, and Distance : On Arendt's Concepts of Persona and Friendship

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## Article

# Alienation, Community, and Distance ; On Arendt's Concepts of Persona and Friendship

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### Introduction

"Identity" is among the most widely discussed concepts of politics. Of course, this concept has been important since Erik Erikson's study of the relationship between personality and cultural and historical change. Today, this concept is in the spotlight in connection with multiculturalism and feminism among other issues. I will not treat all the intricacies of this concept, but it is useful to keep in mind that "identity" is closely connected with collective dimensions of social life. In other words, every person has a personal identity through belonging to a group; whether cultural, ethnic, or gender.

Postmodernism has shaken the notion of identity, and opened it onto difference and alterity. In the reading of Hannah Arendt, this trend has been influential, as illustrated by the emphasis on her concept of "agonal spirit". Scholars have stressed difference rather than identity, and the uniqueness of individuals rather than the collectivity.

Such interpretation of Arendt's thought casts light on the performative aspect of politics as "action". Still, that the leitmotif of Arendt's thought is the quest for the republic, for a lasting

world, should not be overlooked. The republic is a world for alienated people. The republic that Arendt sought is a republic opening to difference. In the republic, each person is recognized by his or her own uniqueness. If the republic is the base of identity, in Arendt, identity is open to freedom. Freedom, then, is the base of identity. But what is Arendt's logic? What does it mean to open identity to freedom? In this paper I hope to clarify this issue of identity opening to freedom. I will suggest that the concepts of friendship and persona are the keys to an understanding of identity. I shall begin with the meaning of community for Arendt.

## 1 Alienation and Distance

The thought of Hannah Arendt has been interpreted as the quest for community by which the plight of alienation will be overcome. Arendt deplored the loss of a common world and a common sense in the modern age, and described totalitarianism as having roots in a mass society that filled with alienated and uprooted people. It was, for her, the loss of community that caused totalitarianism. The quest for community thus was at the core of her thought. I will start by examining George Kateb's interpretation of Arendt and Dana Villa's criticism of Kateb.

In his classic study, Kateb focused on Arendt's criticism of modernity, particularly world alienation and earth alienation. Kateb interpreted world alienation as "the loss of group differentiation."<sup>(1)</sup> For him, the loss of group differentiation is "not only the loss of mediation between the individual self and everything else, but the loss of elements that help to compose a self and sanely enlist its energies." In other words, it is group life that composes individual

identity. Kateb saw group life as the world, “world” meaning “the common life of a group fixed in a place and extending over the generations”<sup>(2)</sup>. From this point of view, world alienation means the process whereby the many lose their ground of identity and are ruthlessly made into One. To be in the group is to be at home in the world. On the other hand, Kateb grasped the concept of earth alienation as the exploitation of nature and the ability to leave the earth for outer space. This is the mentality of “homo faber”, or the attitude of man holding a manipulative control over the earth. This mode of being as “homo faber” brings about alienation in the form of the disruption of man and the world.<sup>(3)</sup> Thus, the interpretation of Kateb amounts to, as Dana Villa argued, an anti-modernist and communitarian view of Arendt.

According to Villa, the problem of modernity for Arendt, as well as for Heidegger, is the subjectification of the real.<sup>(4)</sup> What characterizes modernity is the loss of the public world, which she calls world alienation. In contrast to Kateb, Villa does not believe the core of Arendt's thought to be an emphasis on community for overcoming alienation. According to Villa, it is not correct to interpret Arendt as thinking that alienation is to be solved by the quest for community. If Arendt sought a community of nonalienated existence, “Arendt's political theory, then, would simply be another expression of the ‘unhappy consciousness’”<sup>(5)</sup>. Instead of a community of nonalienated existence, which has cultural rootedness and integrity, Villa stresses the artificiality and the theatricality of the world. These characteristics are opposed to community and an overcoming of alienation, and they correspond to Arendt's performance model of political action. Villa says that “to

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be at home in the world in Arendt's sense means to be at home with the estrangement that permeates both her performative conception of action and her notion of 'disinterested' judgment.<sup>(6)</sup> In short, Villa points out that the problem is to overcome the prejudices that posit a true self behind one's appearance and to resist the demand for "functionalized behavior".

Villa champions the anti-teleological and anti-communitarian interpretation of Arendt's thought. What results from this discussion is an emphasis on the performative characteristics of action and the plurality of the public sphere. Even if there is room for disagreement on whether Arendt assumes the plurality of the public sphere, most scholars would accept her view that "action" is performative and individualistic and that it is impertinent to reduce her thought to the quest for a community in opposition to alienation.

In my opinion, the most important point of Villa's discussion is her emphasis on "estrangement". To be estranged protects an individual from being assimilated into a group or a society and gives him freedom. The importance of this point becomes clear if we recall that Arendt equated politics with the appearance of the uniqueness of individuals and set "parvenu" and "pariah" in opposition. However, on the other hand, it is true that, for Arendt, belonging to a community was a condition for the appearance of individual uniqueness, or "a right to have rights". Without a common world as a community, an individual cannot have any meaning of life. In this respect, there is much that is true in Kateb's argument, which emphasizes the quest for community as the core of Arendt's thought. To put it another way, in Arendt's thought,

these two elements, the quest for community emphasized by Kateb and estrangement as a condition of freedom emphasized by Villa, are inseparably interrelated.

The central problem for us is to examine the mode of being which makes it possible for one to simultaneously belong to a community and to keep distance from that community. Here, the keyword is "distance". In this regard, we recall "the pathos of distance" which Connolly called the tension between freedom and interdependence.<sup>(7)</sup> The importance of the word "distance" is expressed best when Arendt writes:

"We are wont to see friendship solely as a phenomenon of intimacy, in which the friendship opens their hearts to each other unmolested by the world and its demands. Rousseau, not Lessing, is the best advocate of this view, which conforms so well to the basic attitude of the modern individual, who in his alienation from the world can truly reveal himself only in privacy and in the intimacy of face-to-face encounters."<sup>(8)</sup>

Arendt equated intimacy with alienation from the world. That is to say, intimacy is the loss of the world. To put it the other way around, to keep distance, which is the opposite of intimacy, is an overcoming of world alienation. If so, what does it mean to keep distance? To answer this question, we must consider "action" and "identity."

## 2 Action and Identity

Many studies which pay much attention to the postmodernist

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aspect of Arendt have recently appeared. These studies stress the “agonal spirit” and the diversity of individuals, and not the “politics of consensus” but the “politics of difference”. This trend has been supported by Dana Villa and Bonnie Honig for example. While referring to Honig, let us examine the question of “distance” from a different angle.

Honig offers a precise explanation of paradoxical, in some cases even contradictory, aspects of Arendt's thought. Let us begin with the terms “virtue” and “virtu.” Honig contrasts “virtu” theories of politics with “virtue” theories. The “virtue” theories of politics “displace conflict, identify politics with administration and treat juridical settlement as the task of politics and political theory”<sup>(9)</sup>. On the other hand, the “virtu” theories of politics “see politics as a disruptive practice that resists the consolidation and closures of administrative and juridical settlement for the sake of political contest”<sup>(10)</sup>. The latter theories celebrate agonistic conflict, which is characteristic of Arendt, too. But, although Arendt's theory of politics is an instance of “virtu” theory, there is an element in Arendt's thought that focuses on political stability. Honig points out that the preservation of creative action and the founding of authoritative institutions are essential from Arendt's viewpoint<sup>(11)</sup>. Therefore, according to Honig, Arendtian “action” includes two contradictory aspects, one emphasizing contingency and the other stability. But these aspects are integrated in the performative view of politics. Although the concept of creative action makes the world contingent and politics agonal, the founding of authoritative institutions means the founding of lasting communities. To solve this dilemma, Honig claimed that lasting communities are

constituted by forgiving and promising, which are parts of "action"<sup>(12)</sup>.

Thus, Honig makes clear a performative, not constative, feature of the Arendtian idea of politics, and thus clarifies the performative concept of identity, too. Honig points out that "the identity Arendt celebrated has nothing to do with self-knowledge, unified agency, or autonomy."<sup>(13)</sup> Identity is a product of performative action, not a precondition of action. In short, identity is not fixed with regard to a particular group. To resist the fixation of identity is the task of a politics aiming at freedom. This strategy reminds us of Connolly's argument which stresses the importance of drawing attention both to affirming the indispensability of identity and contesting against the dogmatism of identity.<sup>(14)</sup> As Honig's interpretation suggests a lasting polity which is open to contingency or freedom, Connolly's "politics of difference" suggests that which is changeable and particular in contrast to the necessary and universal, or the uncertain and variable in contrast to the certain and constant.<sup>(15)</sup> In other words, both theorists open the concept of identity to freedom. That is to say, identity is acquired not only by belonging to a community but also by commitment to spontaneous action. One may say that this view of identity corresponds to the essential dilemma in Arendt's thought, that belonging to a particular group and keeping distance from it must be satisfied simultaneously. In Arendt's case, we can say that spontaneous action and "distance" are interdependent. The core of Arendt's political theory is "action", and identities of people appear performatively. The concept of identity opening to freedom or contingency is at the core of her thought.



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In Arendt's thought "distance" not only links to freedom but also to the world. The relationship between persons mediated by the world generates "distance". Put another way, this relationship which Arendt admired is not a face-to-face relationship but a relationship in which the world as in-between binds and divides people. Arendt called the relationship mediated by the world "philia", that is, friendship, and called the bearer of such a relationship "persona". This relationship will be discussed next.

### 3 Friendship and Persona

How did Arendt conceive of the relationship mediated by the world? She calls the relationship which is relevant politically "philia", or friendship, after Aristotle. For Arendt, the essence of friendship consists of the discourse concerned with the common world, not in intimate talk about oneself. Put another way, friendship is lacking in intimacy and closeness, and "is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us."<sup>(16)</sup> Here friendship embodies distance, and this friendship links to the common world, namely, the polis or polity. In summary, friendship is not a private sentiment but a public relationship which unites people into a body politic. Put conversely, if a person has interests in public affairs and talks about those interests, he is in friendship and becomes a public man. Then, what is "distance"? It means that people in friendship talks from a different perspective. The diversity of opinions is the "distance". To have different opinions is to have "distance". Therefore, people in friendship are in the common world or polity with distance separating them. This is a paraphrase of the meaning of freedom

mentioned in the preceding section. But “distance” has another aspect. Let us next consider the concept of “persona”.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt calls the person in a polity “persona”, and writes:

The profound meaningfulness inherent in the many political metaphors derived from the theatre is perhaps best illustrated by the history of the Latin word *persona*. In its original meaning, it signified the mask ancient actors used to wear in a play..... The mask as such obviously had two functions: it had to hide, or rather to replace, the actors own face and countenance, but in a way that would make it possible for the voice to sound through. At any rate, it was in this twofold understanding of a mask through which a voice sounds that the word *persona* become a metaphor and was carried from the language of the theatre into legal terminology. The distinction between a private individual in Rome and a Roman citizen was that the latter had a *persona*, a legal personality, as we would say; it was as though the law had affixed to him the part he was expected to play on the public scene.....<sup>(17)</sup>

The purpose of this quotation is to show that Arendt opposes *persona* to natural man, who is outside the range of law and the body politic of citizens, and that the concept of *persona* suggests the existence of a community of law which gives a man the mask of a legal person. We can conclude that the concept of *persona* suggests the existence of legal community as a common world. Here, the important point is that the concept of *persona* relates

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both to actor and polity. In other words, the concept of *persona* refers to the agent of action, but also involves the background of the agent, or the field of action. *Persona* is, as it were, a personalized body politic. A legal community as a common world remains inhuman if it is not constantly talked about by people. In this sense, it is friendship as the constant interchange of talk about the public affairs that transforms the community of law into a human world. Thus, the concept of *persona* is intertwined with friendship.

But “*persona*” is the mask of a player in a legal community. A person as *persona* has legal status: in other words, citizenship. Here, the notion of *persona* raises the question of qualifications for citizenship. Let us turn to the Arendtian view of citizenship.

If citizenship means having membership and legal status in a community, then, Arendt referred to citizenship as nationality in some of her works. For example, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, with respect to “territory”, Arendt writes:

... “territory” ... is a political and a legal concept, and not merely a geographical term. It relates not so much, and not primarily, to a piece of land as to the space between individuals in a group whose members are bound to, and at same time separate and protected from, each other by all kinds of relationships, based on a common language, religion, a common history, customs, and laws. Such relationships become spatially manifest insofar as they themselves constitute the space wherein the different members of a group relate to and have intercourse with each other.<sup>(18)</sup>

Here, Arendt equates territory with a piece of land and "in-between space", which is the relationship of friendship, or the field of action. Membership in such relationships is attached to a piece of land belonging to a state. In the same book, Arendt wrote that "...the Jews had had to lose their nationality before they could be exterminated."<sup>(19)</sup> To be on a piece of land belonging to a state and to have nationality was a breakwater of their life, rights and dignity. She, of course, deplored the predicament of stateless people without national rights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Arendt never took for granted the nation-state system and national community. The modern nation-state based on the national community has generated many stateless people, and, furthermore, has alienated the masses internally. Stateless people and alienated masses share the characteristic of worldlessness. We can say with fair certainty that Arendt searched for the possibility of the realization of the post-nation-state, for example, the small republic.

But we must remember that Arendt gave weight to the legal institutions of a state and their function of protecting all inhabitants. It is such a legal system that supports "persona" as actor in the political scene, protects people from political barbarism, and supplies the basis of freedom. In *The Life of The Mind*, Arendt writes:

Political communities, in which men become citizens, are produced and preserved by laws, and these various forms of governments, all of which in one way or another constrain the free will of their citizens. Still, with the exception of tyranny, where one arbitrary will rules the lives of all, they nevertheless open up some

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space of freedom for action that actually sets the constituted body of citizens in motion.<sup>(20)</sup>

Although the emphasis on the linkage of citizenship and nationality is not peculiar to Arendt, it is worth examining the reasons why Arendt, a theorist of “action” and friendship, emphasized this linkage. It cannot be discussed here in-depth for lack of time. But the following two factors are likely to be involved. One reason is the inclination which we can find in some Jewish thinkers to regard the state as a field of emancipation. Another is a feature of the twentieth century, that the fate of the individual is closely linked with that of the state.

However, we must notice that for Arendt citizenship is not an attribute of the nation-state, but of the republic coming after the collapse of the nation-state. Therefore, the linkage of citizenship and nationality is not a celebration of the nation-state. We must not forget that action and friendship form the core of Arendt's thought. Both citizenship and nationality are different names for the belonging to a republic which is brought into reality by “action in concert”.

### Conclusion

To conclude, in the Arendtian case, belonging to the world means to be in friendship that is formed from the interchange of talk. We can regard this relationship as a field of action and as a system in which one is judged by one's actions and opinions. As is well known, this system is given stress in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Friendship is at the core of the republic she

imaged.

In the same work, Arendt linked friendship to Augustine's concept of love, that is, "Volo ut sis (I want you to be)."<sup>(21)</sup> In all her works, the concept of love plays an important role. For Arendt, love is not only the friendship but also a metamorphosis of Will. In her last work, *The Life of The Mind*, the concept of love is referred to as "a kind of enduring and conflictless Will."<sup>(22)</sup> By this she means that Will as a spiritual organ of spontaneousness and as a springboard of action is metamorphosed into a respect for others by love. This Will is not the Will of Self in solitude. If love and friendship are the same, friendship involves freedom and respect for others.

For Arendt, identity is guaranteed by one's belonging to a community, and belonging to a community means friendship. It is friendship or love that makes identity open to freedom and mutual respect.

- ( 1 ) Kateb, G., *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, Rowman and Allanheld Publishers, 1983, p.159.
- ( 2 ) *Ibid.*, pp.159-160.
- ( 3 ) *Ibid.*, p.164.
- ( 4 ) Villa, D., "Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique," in *Hannah Arendt and the meaning of Politics*, Craig Calhoun and John McGowan, eds., University of Minesota Press, Mineapolis, 1997, pp.183-184. For the relation of distance and friendship, see, Dish L., 'On Friendship in "Dark Times"', in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, edited by Honig B., the Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1995, pp.285-311.
- ( 5 ) Villa, *op. cit.*, p.187.
- ( 6 ) *Ibid.*, p.188.

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- (7) See, Connolly, W., *Identity / Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1991, p.196.
- (8) Arendt, H., *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, 1995, p.24.
- (9) Honig, B., *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993, p.2.
- (10) *Ibid.*
- (11) *Ibid.*, p.77.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p.87.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p.83.
- (14) Connolly, *op.cit.*, p.159.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.28.
- (16) Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957, p.243.
- (17) Arendt, H., *On Revolution*, Penguin Books USA Inc., New York, 1986, p.106.
- (18) Arendt, H., *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, New York, 1964, pp.262-263. For the meaning of Jewish Question in her political thought, see, Bernstein R., *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, Polity Press, UK, 1996.
- (19) *Ibid.*, p.240.
- (20) Arendt, H., *The Life of the Mind: II Willing*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, New York, 1978, p.199.
- (21) Arendt, H., *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, 1979, p.301. For a detailed analysis of the meaning of "love", see Chin Chiba, "Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political," *The Review of Politics*, Vol.57, No.3, Summer 1995, pp.505-535.
- (22) Arendt, H., *The Life of the Mind: II Willing*, *op.cit.*, p. 104.