thinking

togetherness

Andrej Božič (*Ed.*)

THINKING TOGETHERNESS

Phenomenology and Sociality

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Zachary Daus

On the Significance of Mutual Vulnerability in Hannah Arendt's Conception of Freedom

Abstract: The paper offers an interpretation of Hannah Arendt's conception of freedom. After defining her conception of freedom as the experience of spontaneous self-disclosure, I offer an account of the conditions that enable this experience. I describe these conditions as being particular structures of human relations, specifically mutual intelligibility and mutual vulnerability. I focus in particular on mutual vulnerability, arguing that when we are mutually vulnerable to the same risk, we grant each other greater freedom to act in ways that are spontaneous, confident that the other(s) will do nothing to put ourselves at risk. After arguing that the phenomenon of mutual vulnerability is present in Arendt's conception of promising, I broaden my analysis to show how it is present in other forms of social relations, including, but not limited to, the relations that characterize participatory democracy.

Keywords: freedom, vulnerability, interdependence, trust, Arendt.

1. Introduction

Many have acknowledged that Hannah Arendt develops a conception of freedom that is unconventional by the Western philosophical standards. Arendt herself acknowledges this, writing in "Tradition and the Modern Age" (1954) that the "unprecedentedness" of "totalitarian domination" cannot be "comprehended through the usual categories of political thought" and that the "continuity of Occidental history" has been broken (1954, 26). Following Arendt's reasoning, if we are to fully comprehend the unprecedented ways, in which freedom can be denied under totalitarianism, we must first revise our understanding of what freedom is.

The conception of freedom that Arendt develops is, broadly speaking, an existential conception. By existential, I mean that Arendt conceives of freedom as a distinctive "human experience" with lived characteristics (Arendt 1959, 144). I refer to this experience of freedom as *spontaneous self-disclosure*. Self-disclosure refers to the aspect of freedom that reveals "who" we are (Arendt 1958, 179), such as the aims towards which we strive or the principles by which we live. Spontaneity refers to the aspect of freedom that is self-generated and consequently, as Arendt repeatedly emphasizes, unpredictable or unexpected (ibid., 178). Arendt's existential conception of freedom can thus be said to combine both positive and negative conceptions of freedom. Freedom as spontaneity points to negative freedom, insofar as spontaneous action requires some degree of freedom from external interference, while freedom as self-disclosure points to positive freedom, insofar as self-disclosive action reveals the aims and principles by which we desire to live.

Arendt's conception of freedom can also be characterized as relational. Freedom for Arendt is not, as the Western philosophical tradition often emphasizes, dependent upon the exercise of an Augustinian free will or Kantian rational autonomy, but upon certain structures of human relations that enable spontaneous self-disclosure. I focus on two such relational conditions: mutual intelligibility and mutual vulnerability. Because Arendt claims that self-disclosure never occurs alone, but always before an audience that tells the "story" of the actor's action, self-disclosive action must be intelligible to others. While scholars have already stressed the significance of mutual intelligibility in her thought, fewer have addressed the significance of mutual vulnerability. I claim that mutual vulnerability, that is to say, the condition of multiple individuals being vulnerable to the same risk, enables spontaneity by creating an atmosphere of trusting non-control. This is because, when individuals are mutually vulnerable, they trust each other to do nothing that (knowingly) endangers themselves, and consequently grant each other the freedom to act in ways that might otherwise be perceived as unduly risky.

While my intuition is that the phenomenon of mutual vulnerability is implicitly present throughout her political thought, I focus in particular on how mutual vulnerability manifests itself in what Arendt refers to as mutual promising. Ultimately, I suggest that a phenomenology of mutual vulnerability

lies not only at the heart of Arendt's conception of promising and her political thought more generally, but is itself a helpful concept for making sense of our increasingly interdependent world.

2. The experience of freedom

In order to better understand Arendt's conception of freedom as action that is spontaneous and self-disclosive, it is helpful to turn to two modes of human activity that Arendt places in contradistinction to freedom: labor and work.

Labor, on the one hand, denotes the kind of activity that must be performed, in order to sustain biological "life" (Arendt 1958, 87). The results of our labor, such as the creation of nourishment or energy, are fleeting and characterized by cycles of production and consumption. The activity of labor is thus repetitive and predictable. Work, on the other hand, denotes the kind of activity that is performed, in order to produce the "durable" artifacts that constitute our material culture (ibid., 137). The results of our work are more permanent than those of our labor. While the activity of our work is consequently less repetitive than that of our labor—and even allows for a degree of creativity—, it is nonetheless predictable. This predictability is described by Arendt, when she characterizes the mentality of the worker as being that of the Platonic ideal of the "craftsman," who must produce the products of their craft "in accordance with the idea" that serves as their initial model for their finished product (ibid., 142).

Action, unlike labor and work, is the human activity, in which freedom as spontaneous self-disclosure is experienced. While Arendt suggests that action and, by extension, experiences of freedom primarily occur in the activity of participatory democracy, she also suggests that action can also occur in apolitical activities, such as those that the ancient Greeks categorized as "*techne*" (1958, 207). The spontaneous aspect of action, on the one hand, refers to that which is fundamentally "unexpected" and thus corresponds to the "fact of birth" or "the human condition of natality" (ibid., 178). Arendt cites the ancient Greek conception of the literary "hero" as an example of such a spontaneity, who possesses the "willingness to […] insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own" (ibid., 186). The self-disclosive aspect of

action, on the other hand, refers to that which reveals to others the uniqueness of the actor and thus corresponds to "the human condition of plurality" (ibid., 178), since it combines the uniqueness of individuality and the equality of intelligibility. As an example of such self-disclosure Arendt describes the "art works that glorify a deed or an accomplishment" and, in so doing, disclose the uniqueness of the "hero" who performed it (ibid., 187).

Before continuing to a closer analysis of the relational conditions that enable spontaneous self-disclosure, a brief explanation of Arendt's motivations is in order. As already mentioned, Arendt develops her conception of freedom as an intentional response to the 20th-century totalitarianism. I interpret Arendt's intention as pragmatic, guided by the reasoning that, if we are to avoid future totalitarian domination, we must develop forms of political thought and action that are responsive to its threat. One of the principle causes of the rise of totalitarianism, according to Arendt, is social "alienation" (1951, 427–445). If individuals are alienated from the principles that guide themselves and their communities, they will be more likely to support totalitarian movements. This points to the significance of freedom as self-disclosure. Spontaneity is significant, not insofar as its absence is a cause for totalitarianism, but insofar as its absence is an effect—or symptom—of totalitarianism. As Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the destruction of "man's power to begin something new out of his own resources" is a hallmark of totalitarian systems, such as National Socialism (ibid., 596).

To borrow a metaphor from medicine, we can characterize Arendt's pragmatic characterization of freedom as spontaneous self-disclosure as both detective and preventative. It is detective in the sense that, when human spontaneity is absent, totalitarian domination is possibly the cause. It is preventative in the sense that, when human alienation is ameliorated through acts of self-disclosure, the possibility of totalitarian domination emerging is reduced.

3. The relations of freedom

In addition to being existential and pragmatic, Arendt's conception of freedom is relational. It does not conceive of freedom in terms of free will,

rational autonomy, or non-interference, as the likes of Augustine, Immanuel Kant, and Isaiah Berlin respectively do. Instead, the experience of freedom as spontaneous self-disclosure depends on particular structures of relations with other humans. This section now turns to the relational conditions that are necessary for this experience of freedom, with special focus given to the condition of mutual vulnerability.

The first condition that enables freedom as spontaneous self-disclosure is mutual intelligibility. As Jeremy Arnold observes, for spontaneous action to differ from mere acts of randomness, it must in some sense be "minimally intelligible" to others (Arnold 2020, 96). In the case of spontaneous self-disclosure, this intelligibility is the ability for spontaneous action to convey some aspect of the identity of its actor. Arendt claims that this disclosure occurs, when humans are "with" each other, writing: "the revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness" (1958, 180). She clarifies this "sheer human togetherness" as being similar to the relation between actor and audience, writing that the "who" that is disclosed is like the "*daimon*" of ancient Greek religion, which "accompanies man throughout his life" and is "visible to those he encounters," but "hidden from the person himself" (ibid., 179–180). If the self can only be fully disclosed to others, then acts of self-disclosure must be intelligible to others.

The second condition that enables freedom as spontaneous self-disclosure is mutual vulnerability. The role of vulnerability in the thought of Arendt has admittedly received little attention from scholars. A notable exception is Judith Butler, who in "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" (2012) suggests that Arendt invokes the notion of mutual vulnerability to justify a form of ethical responsibility. According to Butler, Arendt's concept of plurality refers to groups of distinct individuals who are interdependent, insofar as they are mutually vulnerable to the threat of unfreedom. Because freedom depends on human distinctness, distinct individuals are interdependent upon each other for their freedom. Or, as Butler writes: "Without the plurality against which we cannot choose, we have no freedom." (2012, 143.) And freedom depends on human distinctness, because, according to Arendt, genuine self-disclosure can only occur with the assistance of an audience of distinct individuals. As Butler herself observes,

this justification of ethical responsibility is nonetheless problematic, as it implies that our responsibility to those who are distinct from us exists, only insofar as they constitute a pluralistic audience before whom we can perform self-disclosure. This can by no means be the only justification for pluralistic tolerance.

While Butler interprets mutual vulnerability as an intriguing yet problematic explanation for our responsibility towards those who are distinct from us, it can also—and perhaps less problematically—be understood as an explanation for human spontaneity. We can better understand how mutual vulnerability enables human spontaneity by turning to Arendt's interpretation of human promising. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt interprets promises as a means for reducing unpredictability while enabling spontaneity, likening them to temporary "islands" in "oceans of uncertainty" (1958, 237). Key to understanding how promising preserves spontaneity while reducing unpredictability is the phenomenon of mutual vulnerability. While it might be intuitive that *promisees* are vulnerable to the fulfillment (or nonfulfillment) of the promise, Arendt implies that *promisors* are similarly vulnerable, claiming that "without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we [promisors] would never be able to keep our identities" (ibid.). In other words, the promisee is vulnerable to the promise, insofar as he or she desires the benefits of its fulfillment, and the promisor, insofar as he or she desires to maintain his or her sense of identity.

Inspired by Arendt, Paul Ricoeur in *The Course of Recognition* (2005) similarly emphasizes the significance of promising to the promisor, writing that the promisor both "plac[es] himself under a certain obligation to do what he says" as well as makes a "commitment" to "the other to whom the promise is made" (2005, 129). Ricoeur describes this "obligation" as a "more fundamental promise" that "precedes any promise making" (ibid.), in which both commitment to oneself as promisor and commitment to the other as promisee is subsumed. This more fundamental promise can be understood as what Ricoeur refers to as the promisor's "will to self-constancy, to remaining true to form, which seals the story of a life confronted with changes in circumstances and changes of heart" (2005, 129–130). By emphasizing the significance of our will to self-constancy, Ricoeur, like Arendt, consequently suggests that promises are a relation of mutual vulnerability: the promisor with

respect to his or her desire for self-constancy, the promisee with respect to his or her desire for whatever benefits come with its fulfillment.

How, then, does the mutual vulnerability of promising enable spontaneity? As has already been briefly described, when two or more individuals are mutually vulnerable and recognize their vulnerability, they trust each other to do nothing that will put themselves at risk, because to put another at risk is—when mutually vulnerable—to put oneself at risk. In the case of promising, when a promisor is vulnerable to the fulfillment of a promise *vis-à-vis* his or her desire for self-constancy and the promisee recognizes this vulnerability, the promisee will trust that the promisor will do nothing to knowingly hinder the fulfillment of the promise. This creates an atmosphere of trusting non-control, in which the promisee affords the promisor a greater degree of spontaneity in how they carry out the promise, knowing that the promise, even if carried out unconventionally, will still likely be fulfilled. And should the promisor fail to fulfill the promise, recognition of their vulnerability encourages forgiveness, or, as Arendt writes, "redemption from the predicament of irreversibility" (1958, 237).

4. The phenomenon of mutual vulnerability

The phenomenon of mutual vulnerability, and the experience of spontaneity it encourages, is not restricted to the practice of promising. In this final section, I will expand my analysis of mutual vulnerability to other contexts, specifically empathetic as well as professional relations. Finally, I will return to political relations, describing how participatory democracy encourages mutual vulnerability between its citizens and, in so doing, experiences of freedom as spontaneous self-disclosure.

What distinguishes empathy from similar attitudes, such as sympathy, is that empathy entails sharing the affective state of the person with whom one is empathizing. This means that, when we are empathetic, we not only are aware of another's affective state, but to some extent experience it ourselves.[1] Some philosophers have built on this basic insight, claiming that

1 Shaun Gallagher in *Action and Interaction* (2020) offers a philosophical account of the neuroscience behind this interpretation of empathy: "Empathy involves being in

empathy so construed plays a role in moral judgment, insofar as sharing a negative affective state with another includes sharing a negative valuation of the intentional object, towards which that state is directed.[2] If we share the affective state of a person who suffers a violent attack, for example, it is likely that we, too, will question the value of violent attacks. With the concept of mutual vulnerability in mind, we can build on these claims in a different way. When we are in a relation with an individual whom we know is empathetic, we will likely experience greater spontaneity, trusting that their empathetic vulnerability to our potential suffering will encourage them to do nothing that knowingly causes our suffering.

We can also encounter the phenomenon of mutual vulnerability in professional relations. A significant amount of literature, particularly in the field of management studies, already exists on the relationship between vulnerability and trust in professional relations. Some scholars emphasize that an acceptance of vulnerability is necessary for trust (Rousseau *et al*. 1998), others emphasize that an expression of vulnerability is necessary, particularly for those in leadership roles (Nienaber *et al.* 2015). Few—if any—emphasize the significance of mutual vulnerability. We can come to an understanding of the significance of mutual vulnerability for fostering trust and, by extension, spontaneity in professional relationships by turning to the example of a joint work project. When two or more colleagues are mutually vulnerable to the completion of a project and are aware of each other's vulnerability, they will likely grant each other greater freedom to act in ways that might otherwise be considered risky, trusting each other to be equally committed to the successful completion. This atmosphere of trusting non-control can be compared to a jazz ensemble, whose members allow each other the freedom to improvise, trusting that they are committed to the quality of the performance itself.

Finally, we can also encounter the phenomenon of mutual vulnerability in the activity that Arendt identifies as the paradigmatic context for the experience of freedom: participatory democracy. Participatory democracy encourages experiences of spontaneous self-disclosure by giving its citizens

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the same or similar affective state as the other." (2020, 177.)

2 For a clear presentation of the relationship between empathy and moral judgment, see Catrin Misselhorn's account in *Künstliche Intelligenz und Empathie* (2021, 61–66).

a context for addressing issues, to which they are mutually vulnerable. When citizens trust each other to have their mutual interests at heart, they grant each other the freedom to creatively ameliorate the threats that endanger their interests. It is in such contexts of trusting non-control that not only a nation's "heroes" are disclosed, but the "principles" that guide its collective action, such as "love of equality" or "honor" (Arendt 1959, 151). For a less abstract example we can turn to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, where spontaneous acts of Ukrainian heroism helped to disclose national sovereignty as a guiding principle of the Ukrainian nation.[3]

5. Conclusion

Freedom for Arendt is the lived experience of spontaneous self-disclosure. Such experiences occur, when we unexpectedly reveal to others some aspect of who we are. Freedom is for Arendt also relational, insofar as the relations of mutual intelligibility and mutual vulnerability are necessary for our realization of freedom as spontaneous self-disclosure. In this essay, I focused particularly on mutual vulnerability, arguing that it promotes spontaneity by encouraging relations of trusting non-control. Beginning with mutual promising, I broadened my analysis of mutual vulnerability to other relational structures, such as empathetic and professional relations, before concluding with a brief analysis of participatory democracy.

While by now it is hopefully clear that Arendt indicates a starting point, from which we can think about freedom in ways that stress the significance of mutual vulnerability, we must also be aware of the limitations of her approach. Arendt's conception of mutual promising conceives of mutual vulnerability in terms of a desire for existential self-constancy and not, for example, bodily well-being. This reflects Arendt's reticence in discussing the human body and its biological needs, as well as her controversial view that politics ought not to concern itself with matters related to biological necessity, which she relegates

3 Accounts of contemporary perceptions of Ukrainian national sovereignty can be found in *Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian Intellectuals* (2019). As Hanna Shelest, for example, writes, following the Russian invasion of Donbas, "nobody is questioning […] [Ukrainian] sovereignty" (2019, 300).

to the activity of "labor." If we are to build upon the conception of mutual vulnerability found in the thought of Arendt, it would be prudent to extend her analysis to vulnerabilities of a bodily nature. The mutual vulnerability of empathy is perhaps a starting point for this project, but more can be done.

As increasing globalization and accelerating climate change continue to converge and bring humanity closer together, I believe that the significance of mutual vulnerability will only become more pronounced. The Western tradition, long favoring individualistic conceptions of ideas like freedom, has hindered our ability to discuss phenomena like mutual vulnerability in an explicit and constructive way. While it is possible to turn to the non-Western traditions for meaning in this new era, we can also turn to lesser-known currents in the Western philosophy that center relational phenomena like mutual vulnerability. I propose that the thought of Arendt can assist us in this endeavor.

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