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PHIL 302

The Human Condition, Part II

The second chapter in Hannah Arendt's work *The Human Condition*, titled "The Public and the Private Realm," seeks to differentiate and assess the elements of the primary spheres of activity — the public and the private realms — in which humans must engage in to retain their humanity; she devotes attention to cataloging the evolution of the spheres as it corresponds with advancements in human society and how the basic nature of each sphere is changed as a result of that. Another main topic she addresses within the second chapter is the rise of the social realm in the modern era, which she feels poses a significant threat to the sanctity of the other two realms, as it blurs the distinctions between the two by taking matters which previously belonged to the private sphere and bringing them to the public sphere, and thus the political stage, for all to see.

Initially, within the first subtopic of the chapter, titled "Man: A Social or a Political Animal," Arendt looks to the past to provide readers with a basic, fundamental understanding of the private and public realms. She begins by stating that "no human life... is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings," meaning that there is a public element required in the maintenance of humanity, that without the company of other humans, man would partake in action alone and become a form of "divine demiurge" with no ties to reality (22). The presence of others and the public demand that arises along with that is the first "sharp distinction in [ones] life between what is [their] own and what is communal," clearly separating the existing private sphere, which is concerned with matters of the household, from the public sphere, which resulted in the creation of the polis by the ancient Greeks (24). The polis, serving as a social realm only in the sense that politics requires the company and verbal input of other individuals to ensure that the "central concern[s] of all citizens" are addressed (27). Arendt stresses the point that in this instance the political sphere as described here is not the same as the social sphere that will be discussed in later subtopics, but rather because it was evident that the "power of the tyrant [or leader] was less great, less 'perfect' than the power with which the paterfamilias... ruled over his household," which worked towards maintaining the public sphere of the tyrant separate from the private sphere of the household (27).

The second subtopic, titled "The Polis and the Household," dives further into rectifying the "misunderstanding [of] equating the political and social realms" by elaborating on the blurred line between the private and public spheres, as it has become commonplace for us to see "people and political communities in the image of a family" being managed economically by "nation-wide administration" (28). Arendt argues that the birth of the city-state and the public, political realm that arose with it came at the expense of the private realm; the private sphere of existence was driven by biological wants and needs necessary to "individual maintenance and survival... of the species," but the public realm was the only space that offered genuine freedom as it could only be entered by those who had mastered the art of successfully running a household (30). "The polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only 'equals,' whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality," meaning that in the polis, a man could be among individuals deemed his peers and experience the freedom of not having to be a "master," while at home he was surrounded by his family members, of whom were in inferior standing when compared to him, and who relied on him for guidance (32). Arendt begins to explain that

the immense gulf between the political and modern social realms is hard to detect, as many matters that previously were strictly private concerns, such as matters of finance, have become “‘collective’ concern[s]” and that the aspects of these two distinct realms “constantly flow into each other like waves” in our modern understanding of them (33).

The “Rise of the Social,” the third subtopic, builds on the concept of modern society; it is here that Arendt states that the “enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism” has robbed the private sphere of its privacy and has created a modern form of the private sphere, of which the primary goal is to combat the conformism encouraged by the social realm and shelter the intimate aspects of humanity, such as love and art (38). Conformity is borne of the publication of private matters and the “absorption of the family unit into corresponding social groups,” and while it does have a significant role in society by being the basis of modern equality, the mutual dependence it creates within individuals encourages ideas which Arendt refers to as “‘communistic fiction’” (40, 44). However, the social realm and mass society that has emerged from the desire of individuals to preserve “the one-ness of man-kind” is ever-expanding and it is against “this growth... that the private and intimate... and the political... have proved incapable of defending themselves” (46, 47). Despite the diminished stature of the public and private, and by association intimate, spheres experience in the face of the social sphere, certain attributes, such as excellence, can only be attained in the sphere that allows all qualifications of the element to be met.

The fourth subtopic is titled “The Public Realm: The Common,” and within it, Arendt further discusses the term “public” as it applies to a sphere of human existence and the common world which is created from the public sphere. First, she states that the public realm is what “constitutes reality” for humanity, only elements of our lives that have an appearance — that is, that can be seen and heard by everybody — are public; private and intimate matters such as “passions of the heart, thoughts of the mind, and delights [or torments] of the senses,” because they have no physical appearance, can only exist within the private realm (50). Elements such as these are often adored by the public sphere, as they are viewed as “the world’s last, purely humane corner,” since the public realm is unable to host things that are “irrelevant,” or unable to be seen (52). Arendt’s second meaning of the term public relates specifically to the commonality of the world, as “to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common” (52). She makes reference to the establishment of the Order of Saint Augustine, a Catholic brotherhood, as an example for the one thing that has been historically known to unite men and maintain a community in our shared world — charity, which benefits the common good of all men; “men entered the public realm because they wanted something of their own [such as freedom from the household] or something they had in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives,” and despite the “utter diversity” found within the contributors, that is necessary for maintaining the public world, as unnatural conformism indicates that men have become “entirely private” (55, 58).

“The Private Realm: Property,” the fifth subtopic, is where Arendt expands on the negative impact of mass society, the social realm, on the private realm; it the expanding social sphere seeks to “[deprive] men not only of their place in the world, but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world” (59). The reasoning for this is that, private property, while part of the private realm s it acts as a shield for mankind against the public eye,

has always “[possessed] certain qualifications... thought to be of utmost importance to the political body,” thus bringing it into the public sphere; the primary example for this is that, in antiquity and afterwards, the ownership of property was a requirement for citizenship, and thus the admittance to the public, political realm (61). While poverty, or the lack of private property, “forces free [men] to act like [slaves],” excessive accumulation of private property, encouraged by the social sphere, rather than participation in the political realm, is also viewed as negative by Arendt, stating that it shows that a man has “willing sacrificed his freedom... [to become] a servant of necessity” (64, 65).

The shorter sixth and seventh subtopics, “The Social and the Private” and the “Location of Human Activities,” are where Arendt discusses, respectively, the dangers of the elimination of the private realm through the “abolition of private property... [removing it as man’s] tangible, worldly place of [their own]” and the sphere in which specific human activities must exist based on the qualities of the activity and the criteria associated with each realm, making use of “the admittedly extreme example of doing good works” (70, 78). The private sphere offers “the only reliable hiding place from the common [shared] world,” thus the elimination of this forces elements such as biological necessity and labor into the forefront public sphere where these factors are exploited; when society decides that emancipation from the confines of the private realm are beneficial to them, the phenomena of ““communistic fiction”” again arises (71). In the subsection regarding human activities, Arendt states that although labor, work, and action are important activities, goodness, “one important variety of possible human action” works best for her illustration regarding location (74). Due to the nature of good works, “the moment [one] becomes known... it loses its specific character of goodness,” as the point of a good work is not to gain recognition but rather to do a charitable thing, so they must always remain separate from the public sphere; genuine good works “can never become part of the [visible] world” (74, 76). Arendt also uses the example of badness, which comes out of hiding in the private realm in attempt to “directly destroy the common world” that is shared by all within the private realm” (77). She states that she does not intend to begin an exhaustive assessment of human activities and their proper location within the spheres, but rather to make the point that activities outside of their designated realm have political significance in that their influence alters the sphere it spills into.