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1

Introduction

Years ago, I brought Hannah and Isaiah together. [. . .] The meeting was a disaster from the start. She was too solemn, portentous, Teutonic, Hegelian for him. She mistook his wit for frivolousness and thought him inadequately serious.

—ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.¹

IN 1991, the American philosopher Norman Oliver Brown wrote to his friend and former tutor Isaiah Berlin,² and favourably mentioned a recently published book entitled *Republic of Fear*.³ A pioneering study of Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath Party, the book drew comparisons between the 'Kafkaesque' world of Saddam's Iraq and its purported precursors in the twentieth century. In so doing, it drew on some of the anti-totalitarian classics, including Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty* and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁴ Berlin was not pleased with this pairing. He wrote to Brown, 'I assume that [*Republic of Fear*] is about the horrors of Iraq, etc., but what deeply offends me is the linking of my name with that of Miss Hannah Arendt [. . .]. [D]o tell me that you do see some radical differences between Miss Arendt and myself—otherwise how can we go on knowing each other?'⁵

The strong dislike for Arendt that Berlin expressed in his 1991 letter to Brown has a long history. It began a half-century earlier, when the two thinkers were introduced to each other in wartime New York. Not much is known about this meeting, but their opinions were certainly different and their personal chemistry evidently bad. The relationship between the two thinkers did not improve, to say the least, when they spoke again at Harvard University about a decade later, probably in 1949. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the political scientist who arranged this meeting, would later recall the occasion as a 'disaster from the start'.⁶ Their paths did not cross again for more than fifteen years, as Berlin continued to build his dazzling academic career in Britain, while Arendt established herself as an influential public intellectual in the United States.

Nevertheless, they were not far apart socially, culturally or intellectually. They not only shared various research interests but also had many mutual friends, academic contacts and collaborators. Some of them, most notably the British political theorist Bernard Crick, attempted to persuade Berlin of the importance of Arendt's work. The Oxford philosopher was never persuaded. On the contrary, enhanced by his deep scepticism about the phenomenological tradition in philosophy, Berlin dismissed her theoretical work such as *The Human Condition* as an assemblage of 'free metaphysical association'.⁷ His contempt subsequently evolved into a lifelong hatred with the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in 1963. He wholeheartedly endorsed the widespread accusation that Arendt arrogantly and patronisingly blamed the victims of the Holocaust and that she proposed a deeply flawed account of evil.

Curiously, despite his disdain for Arendt and her work, Berlin kept reading—or, more precisely, skimming through—her books and articles, including neglected works such as *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* as well as more major writings such as *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*.⁸ The more he read, however, the more convinced he was that his assessment of Arendt's work had been sound. The late Berlin summarised his considered opinion as follows: Arendt 'produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought'.⁹ In addition, Berlin's animosity towards Arendt was never softened either by her death or by the ensuing passage of time. In the 1991 letter to Brown cited above, Berlin described Arendt as 'a real *bête noire* to me—in life, and after her death'. He continued, 'I really do look upon her as everything that I detest most'.¹⁰

Arendt was aware of Berlin's hostility towards her. This was thanks in no small part to the writer Mary McCarthy, who repeatedly disputed Berlin's dismissal of Arendt, so much so that her friendship with him came to be 'destroyed' as a result.¹¹ Meanwhile, Arendt herself never quite reciprocated Berlin's hostility. For one thing, she was, and was proud to be, a controversial figure, attracting many embittered critics especially after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She could not possibly respond to all of them, and from her point of view Berlin did not stand out as an especially important or worthy one. She was aware of his standing and connections in Britain, Israel and the USA, but she hardly considered him to be an original thinker.¹² This was partly because Arendt took the superiority of German philosophy over its Anglo-American counterpart for granted. Although she respected Hobbes, she generally saw Britain as something of a philosophical desert and saw little merit in the analytic movement inaugurated by Russell, Moore and others. In this respect, our protagonists' prejudices were symmetrical: just as Berlin was unable to appreciate German phenomenology, Arendt was unable to appreciate British empiricism.

Nevertheless, Arendt regarded Berlin as a learned scholar, especially when it came to Russian intellectual history. She sometimes used his writings in her classes;¹³ and her surviving personal library contains a copy of Berlin's first book, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, and four essays by him.¹⁴ It is, however, indicative that the only piece by Berlin that Arendt seems to have read carefully was his introduction to Franco Venturi's *Roots of Revolution*. In fact, it is as the author of this introduction that Berlin makes his one and only appearance (in a footnote) in Arendt's published work.¹⁵ For her, Berlin was a respectable intellectual historian and a moderately important member of what she called the 'Jewish establishment'. His animosity towards her was met by her indifference to him, accompanied by occasional suspicion.

Things could have been different. They were contemporaries, Arendt born in 1906 and Berlin in 1909. They belonged to the group of twentieth-century Jewish émigré intellectuals whose thoughts and life stories were intertwined with each other.¹⁶ Born into German-Jewish and Baltic-Jewish families respectively, Arendt and Berlin alike experienced their share of antisemitism in their formative years. Both came to be preoccupied with Europe's looming crises in the 1930s, decided to abandon a promising career in pure philosophy by the end of World War II and thereafter devoted much of their time and energy to understanding the roots of totalitarianism, containing its growth and preempting its resurgence. Both of them had friends and relatives murdered or driven to death by the totalitarian regimes that they came to study in their academic work. Moreover, they themselves lived in the emerging totalitarian world and were consequently in a position to do something akin to what anthropologists call 'participatory observation': data collection by way of actually living in the society one aims to study. As is well known, the young Isaiah Berlin witnessed in horror both the February and October Revolutions in Petrograd. He subsequently returned to Soviet Russia to serve in the British Embassy in 1945–46, after having 'a recurring nightmare of being arrested' and giving thought to the prospect of suicide in the event of an arrest.¹⁷ For her part, Arendt was arrested and endured an eight-day interrogation in Nazified Germany, followed by a five-week detention in an internment camp in occupied France (where she too gave thought to taking her own life) before migrating to the United States to write *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Oppression, domination, inhumanity and the subversion of politics were their existential as well as intellectual issues; so were freedom, humanity and politics.

The twin goals of this study are to trace the development of the unfortunate relationship between the historical figures of Hannah Arendt and Isaiah

Berlin, and to bring their ideas into conversation. The former goal is historical and biographical in nature; the latter, theoretical. The former involves the following questions:

- When and where did Arendt and Berlin meet, and what happened during those meetings?
- How did the personal conflict between the two emerge?
- How did Berlin develop his animosity towards Arendt, and she her indifference and suspicion towards him?
- What other interactions did they have apart from their actual meetings?

These questions are worth asking not only because they form a fascinating part of twentieth-century intellectual, literary and cultural history. They are worth asking also because the personal, the political and the intellectual were hardly separable in both Arendt's and Berlin's lives and works. I take seriously what I believe to be an elementary truth about them both: political theory for them was more than a job or paid work. It was a vocation in the Weberian sense, and each led the life of a political thinker, embodying a distinct theoretical outlook.¹⁸ Deeply concerned with urgent issues of their times, both of our protagonists attempted to exercise, albeit in differing ways, influence on the 'real world' they inhabited. As I shall show, this mode of living and thinking has its own downsides and consequently is not unequivocally superior to the more detached and institutionalised mode of political theorising that has become the norm today. Still, we have some good reason to feel nostalgic about the time when political theorists took themselves more seriously because their 'ideas really did have consequences.'¹⁹

The other, theoretical side of this study concerns a set of fundamental issues that simultaneously connected and divided our protagonists. They connected in that they were central to both Arendt's and Berlin's thought; and they divided in that they were answered by the two thinkers in conflicting ways. Those central issues may be formally and schematically stated as follows:

- What does it mean for human beings to be free?
- What is it like for a person to be denied his or her freedom, and deprived of his or her humanity?²⁰ What are the central features of the worst form of unfree and inhumane society, known as totalitarianism, and how does this paradigmatically emerge?
- How should we assess the apparent failure to resist or confront the evil of totalitarianism, such as when one is coerced into cooperating with a state-sponsored mass murderer?
- What kind of society or polity ought we to aim to build if we want as many people as possible to be free and live a genuinely human life?

Arendt's and Berlin's sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting reflections on these questions will be considered in Chapters 3–6. These chapters are thematically organised, although each is loosely tied to a chronological phase. The third chapter, on 'Freedom', focuses on the late 1950s and early 1960s, when both of our protagonists fully matured as political thinkers and presented their rival theories of freedom, underpinned by competing views of the human condition. The fourth chapter, on 'Inhumanity', covers a longer period and traces the protagonists' lifelong engagement with totalitarianism. It mainly examines two distinct bodies of work: their wartime and immediate post-war analyses of totalitarian politics and society; and their later attempts to reconsider the history of Western political thought in light of the reality of Nazism and Stalinism. Chapter 5, on 'Evil and Judgement', focuses on Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Berlin's commentary on it. As their dispute is tied to their disagreement over central moral and political concepts, such as responsibility, judgement, power and agency, this chapter also covers the relevant work on these concepts. Chapter 6, on 'Islands of Freedom', delves more deeply into the two thinkers' middle and late works to tease out their competing visions of an ideal polity. Along the way, it considers their rival perspectives on a range of real-world politics and societies, including Britain's liberal present and its imperial past, the United States in the turbulent 1960s and Central and East European resistance to Soviet domination. In the Conclusion (Chapter 7), I briefly restate my main arguments and consider their implications for political thought and political philosophy today.

Although the story I tell in this book has many twists and turns, its backbone is simple and may be programmatically stated as follows. First, at the heart of the theoretical disagreement between Arendt and Berlin lie competing views of what it means to be human (Chapter 3). If, as Miller and Dagger observe, contemporary political theory is characterised by its dismissal of 'deep metaphysical questions', such as that of 'the human condition', as irrelevant to 'discover[ing] how people should live in societies and order their common affairs', both Arendt and Berlin belonged to an earlier era, when political theory was less 'shallow'.²¹ Second, the two thinkers' disagreement over freedom and humanity is anchored in their differing perspectives on totalitarianism. Although both took totalitarianism to be the ultimate form of inhumanity and unfreedom, they theorised it differently, as a result of focusing on competing models of it: the Nazi model in Arendt's case, and the Bolshevik model in Berlin's (Chapter 4). These differences—over freedom and humanity on the one hand, and the unfreedom and inhumanity of totalitarianism on the other—gave rise to further points of disagreement over a number of issues. These included the possibility of resistance under totalitarian conditions (Chapter 5), and the shape of an ideal polity, where men and women have a

decent chance to live a free and fulfilling life (Chapter 6). Arendt's and Berlin's experiences and life stories provide an important backdrop to all of those major points of comparison, although their ideas are not reducible to their biographies. Thus, the historical-biographical story told in Chapter 2 informs the rest of the book that focuses on the theoretical disagreement between the two thinkers.

Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin is the first comprehensive study of the Arendt–Berlin conflict in all its personal, political and theoretical aspects. Needless to say, however, it builds on the existing literature that has illuminated the conflict from more specific angles. While each such contribution will be discussed (often in notes) in the pages that follow, what needs to be highlighted in this introductory chapter is the scarcity and late emergence of the relevant literature. True, those who knew Arendt and/or Berlin personally began writing on their conflict as early as the 1970s;²² and yet scholarly works on it have appeared only recently.²³ This is no accident. In fact, Berlin's determination to distance himself from the woman he 'detested most' played a significant role in this context.²⁴ As those who have examined his unpublished papers will know, Berlin had much to say on Arendt and her work, but he hardly ever expressed his views in print because he disliked her so much that he was unwilling 'to enter into any relations with [her], not even those of hostility'.²⁵ It is true that there was one exception to this rule in his lifetime: he let one substantial commentary on Arendt appear in 1991, as part of his interviews with Ramin Jahanbegloo.²⁶ Except for this, however, he kept his public silence on his 'bête noire'.²⁷ As a result, it was only after his death in 1997 that Berlin's hostile comments on Arendt began to appear in print. Michael Ignatieff's authorised biography was an important turning point in this regard.²⁸ Nevertheless, it still gave an incomplete picture, attracting some insightful, but largely speculative remarks by scholars.²⁹ A fair sample of Berlin's full commentary on Arendt's work and personality only appeared in 2004–15, when Henry Hardy, Jennifer Holmes and Mark Pottle published his select letters in four volumes.³⁰ This is why the Arendt–Berlin conflict, especially his hostility towards her, has been a topic largely neglected until recently; and why the telling of the whole story of this conflict has never been attempted, until now.

Finally, I would like to make some remarks to indicate at the outset what this book is *not* about. First, as should already be clear, this study is a piece neither of undiluted political philosophy nor of undiluted intellectual

history. It mobilises methodological tools taken from both disciplines. On the one hand, it carefully examines Arendt's and Berlin's life stories and reconstructs the relevant contexts to illuminate the two thinkers' ideas and their comparative strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, it often discusses their ideas in the abstract, bracketing the contexts in which these were produced, circulated and consumed. Sceptics might say that such juxtaposition of the two approaches is of necessity incoherent. They might say that political philosophy and intellectual history are entirely separate enterprises, and one must choose which approach to use before applying either of them to the object of study. I beg to differ. In my opinion, in the study of political thought broadly construed, the choice of a method should follow the object and goal of study, not vice versa. And this study requires both philosophical and historical approaches. To borrow the words of a recent historian of philosophy, to complain of academic research such as mine 'as neither properly philosophical nor properly historical is like complaining of a bridge that it is neither on one bank nor the other'.³¹ That said, I shall not dwell on methodological issues at a general and abstract level, because the present study is not a contribution to the methodological debate in political thought. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The following chapters show *what* my research found; after reading the book, each reader may draw his or her own conclusions as to whether the *way* I conducted my research has been successful or not.

Second, this study is not a defence of one of our protagonists against the other. It is, on the contrary, a decidedly non-partisan book. Needless to say, this does not mean that I am or attempt to be neutral vis-à-vis the Arendt–Berlin conflict. It means, rather, that I assess the two thinkers' individual arguments on their own merits, instead of supporting either of them indiscriminately. I know this is likely to disappoint some readers. In this context it is worth recalling that Arendt, if not Berlin, remains a highly divisive figure, commanding blind loyalty among some and inciting strong hostility among others. The former would like to see an unflinching defence of their master against her critics; the latter, a wholesale attack on their nemesis. This book is of no use to either party. As I hope to show in the pages that follow, both Arendt and Berlin got many things right and many things wrong, albeit in differing ways. The point of juxtaposing the two is not to decide which side 'won', for disagreement between thinkers is not a sporting competition, a beauty contest or any other such game. The point, rather, is to *appreciate* Arendt's and Berlin's ideas better, reading their works against each other, so that the tacit assumptions each theorist made and the hidden biases each had can be teased out and critically scrutinised.

If this sounds evasive, and if I am asked to ‘confess’ my preferences and prejudices, the only thing I can honestly say is as follows: I know I have prejudices in favour of *both* Arendt *and* Berlin. I know that my intellectual formation has been inseparable from my compulsive interest in the works of both, and that my outlook has been fundamentally shaped by my sustained critical engagement with them both. Arendt and Berlin are *equally* my intellectual heroes.

The two heroes, however, failed disastrously to get along with each other. The next chapter tells the story of this failure.

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