

# Scholarship and Freedom

BY GEOFFREY HARPHAM

*In his latest book *Scholarship and Freedom*, Geoffrey Harpham undertakes an inquiry into the connection between the concepts of freedom and the practice of scholarship. Based on Hannah Arendt's concept of natality he provides a powerful argument in this short excerpt that the practice of scholarship is grounded in the concept of radical freedom, beginning with the freedoms of inquiry, thought, and expression.*

The world as comprehended by scholarship is always in process, always provisional, always unfinished, always awaiting the next revolution. Like modernity itself, scholarship implies infinity, an endlessly transformative process in which current understandings are rejected, improved, modified, supplemented, exchanged. The endless quest, the incomplete project, the ongoing conversation, the open society—these are the tropes of modernity, which are routinely contrasted to pre-modern stasis, repetition, and certitude.

The modernity of scholarship is marked most decisively by its reciprocal relation to the concept of human freedom, whose signature, according to Hannah Arendt, is the capacity to create, to begin, to bring something new into the world. Arendt had introduced this thought in a passage at the very end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948) where, after a sobering and often horrifying historical exploration of antisemitism, racism, imperialism, communism, fascism, and authoritarianism in many forms, she abruptly, and surprisingly to many, alludes to the possibility of a “new beginning” arising from “the supreme capacity of man” to create. Even more surprisingly, she gives the concept a religious as well as a political warrant. “Politically,” she says, beginning “is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est*—‘that a beginning be made man was created’ said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.” What in the world was she thinking?

The concept awaited a fuller elaboration, and a name, for a decade, until Arendt gave a lecture called “What is Freedom?” and published *The Human Condition*, in which the capacity for beginning was baptized as natality. The emphasis on birth as the grounding of human freedom and creation might be seen as an attempt to de-politicize and naturalize the human condition, but Arendt's natality is a biological concept with non-biological entailments. Like others at this time, Arendt was looking for a way to place the moral and political concept of freedom on a firmer foundation than could be provided by historical traditions or political institutions, which had proven themselves unable to prevent the rise of totalitarianisms. Her effort might be compared with that of the linguist Noam Chomsky, who was at about the same time training his attentions on the human capacity to generate an infinite number of new well-formed sentences—evidence, he



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argued, that human beings were innately “creative,” and therefore that any political order that constrained that creativity was violating not just some notion of justice or fairness but human nature itself. Both projects represent attempts to build an anti-totalitarian politics of freedom on a species characteristic, with Arendt arguing that the phenomenon of birth preceded, modeled, and in a sense authorized subsequent creative acts, which could be understood not as risky deviations from routine but as willed reaffirmations of a natural condition to which every human life bore witness.

The deepest potentialities of natality are realized in what Arendt calls action, one of the three “fundamental activities” that define the human condition, the other two being work and labor. As she says repeatedly, action has a “miraculous” character; and yet true action has nothing to do with religion or faith or the inner life. The abstract terms of *The Human Condition* may seem so capacious that anything at all might qualify as action, but Arendt always insists that freedom is political freedom and action political action: “The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom,” she says, “and its field of experience is action.” In a final section on “*The Vita Activa* and the Modern Age,” Arendt wholeheartedly endorses the

modern reversal of the ancient priority of contemplation over action. She dismisses the piffling and evanescent liberties associated with re-

plemented by speech, action becomes a testimonial to a unique human individual declaring itself to a community. But speech has deep roots

in the inner world of reflection and self-understanding; and stories, to which she devotes an entire section, are implicated in fiction, myth, and unreality in general. And so we must pose a different question: is there anything worthy of the name of action that deploys language, that creates something new, that registers human uniqueness, addresses a community, is accountable to reality, and serves the cause of freedom? The answer, I believe, was right under Arendt's nose; indeed, in many of her other works, it was flowing from her pen. Scholarship is produced by situated individuals exercising personal judgment, it is addressed to an unrestricted public, it follows argumentative procedures that are transparent and transpersonal, and it respects evidence. Scholarship is expressive and communi-

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reflection and meditation as shadows of real freedom, as thought is a shadow of action, and she is deeply skeptical, even disapproving, of attempts to locate a ghostly “inner” freedom.

Clarity is an excellent thing, but Arendt's prejudice in favor of the political, while understandable considering the post-war context, limits rather than concentrates the power of her thinking. It is hard to see a bright line between inner and outer freedom, especially since Arendt herself insistently links action with the language that communicates the action to the world. Action and speech, she says, “are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’” Without the accompaniment of speech, action might as well be undertaken by robots; com-

plimentary, but it is accountable to the world in a way that speech and stories as such are not. Most important, in Arendt's terms, scholarship rejects old understandings and creates new ones. Scholarship is not only the most refined and disciplined form of the freedoms of inquiry and expression; it stands at the margin of responsible contemplation and informed action. Its mission is not to create a just society or usher in the reign of reason, but to transform the world of death that is the past into something open, something real, something new. Politics can take it from there. ◀

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