


BOOK REVIEW

## Reimagining Arendt and Berlin: comments and questions for Kei Hiruta, *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* (2021)

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### Achievement

This book is literally a long-awaited work and an achievement without doubt. For those who know Isaiah Berlin a little, his dislike of Hannah Arendt will be too obvious to hide, and they usually uphold a speculation that the reason should probably be found around the Eichmann controversy. But the real details have long been a mystery, and all we can do have been a guesswork as to why. Hiruta directly addresses the very question through a thorough archival empirical study, and provides us with a plausible and ‘impartial’ interpretation over this puzzle. Most importantly, he has communicated with the groups of researchers on each thinker, which, considering the potential and active tensions of the sentiment between the admirers of Berlin and Arendt, could have exacerbated the problem, and has accomplished the difficult task of comprehensively representing the insider perspectives of both sides. His unusual effort is reflected in the careful narrative, which pays subtle attention to both groups. Such a narrative, which requires an impartial stance for the writer, naturally bears in our minds the expectation of a boring writing, but this book brilliantly overturns this anticipation: it goes without saying that it is full of information, but above all, it is simply interesting to read.

The highlight of this book is, in my opinion, the section of ‘A Degree of Shame’ in Ch. 5 (Hiruta, 2021: 138–142), which is particularly informative on historical facts around the two thinkers. Why did Berlin detest Arendt so much? To answer this question properly, the power of imagination based on the primary sources (especially archival resources) is essential. On this point, the book’s excellence is demonstrated in its convincing explanation concerning the conflicts in Berlin’s own inner world and the gender issues that might have influenced their relationship. For example, the explanation that for Berlin, a fortunate Jew in a safe place, Arendt’s seemingly arrogant behaviour strongly shook his feeling of inferiority and shame (or self-blame) is exceptionally persuasive. Indeed, the contrast between Arendt’s ‘sense of pride’ and Berlin’s ‘sense of shame’ on p. 160 is highly illuminating (Hiruta, 2021).

### Contrasts and ‘twists’

The general feature of this book consists in its way of enquiry to the effect that after identifying apparent similarities between Berlin and Arendt, it contextualizes them so as to expose their mere situational nature. Then by delving deeper into the thoughts of the two, it reveals the real differences. As a result, the contrast between their personalities, methods, and (political) ideals, as well as the difference in their lives, which is one of their differential factors, are clearly depicted (a typical example being available on p. 199) (Hiruta, 2021). Such a clear disparity would become a caricature if drawn too beautifully, but considering the purpose and content of this book, the contrasts given appear to be quite appropriate. In my opinion, if this book is translated into Japanese, Berlin’s popularity in Japan will drop further while Arendt fans will be pleased. By all accounts, on a personal emotional level, Berlin looks childish while Arendt looks more mature. However, a careful reading of this book leads to the realization that these contrasting categories create twists. For example, Arendt, whom

Berlin saw first time in 1941, had a childish frenzy at which Berlin seemed to cringe: this episode reveals not only the personal but also the theoretical difference between them on which I will expand.

Berlin and Arendt can thus be portrayed in fine contrasts, but, as I have just said, there are often 'twists' in the contrasts. Let us now look at the basic question of political theory: the relationship between the part and the whole, the individual and the community. Berlin, who famously approves negative liberty, seems to respect the individual, while Arendt, who notably celebrates political freedom, seems to respect the community. For Berlin, however, individual liberty requires the nation to which one belongs. To enjoy secure individual freedom, he or she must belong to some group, especially a cultural and political group. On the contrary, for Arendt, communality, or political freedom, requires a place of manifestation (appearance), but at the same time it requires individual solitude. This solitude does not necessarily entail a nation; rather, the nation can be seen as a danger to political freedom.

The subject of Berlin and nationalism has already been well discussed widely, and I am satisfied with the explanation concerning this point in this book. The theme of Arendt and nationalism has probably accumulated a considerable amount of research as well, but since I am ignorant on this point, I hold a simple puzzle: when Berlin met Arendt in 1941, Arendt appeared to make a commitment to Zionism as nationalism; how should we understand this episode in terms of our understanding of her political views? This is also related to the question of the vision of a Jewish army. I raise this question because the notion of 'politics' of Arendt as we understand it is a politics in which people are united by words rather than by weapons, and by forming a civil society rather than a nation.

The twists in the contrasts between them should be most apparent when discussing responsibility and freedom. Berlin, when arguing with E. H. Carr, emphasized the freedom of historical figures and did not deny historians' activity of discussing their (moral) responsibilities. This fits with his somewhat statist-elitist view of politics to the effect that politics are not determined by individual decisions, but their impact cannot be underestimated. On the contrary, under the influence of Heidegger, Arendt understands human beings as being-in-the-world and sees historical events more structurally. This is not a defence of determinism, but some people call her a historicist. This fits her conception of politics as a matter of civil society, although it is difficult to call her non-elitist. Such a contrast seems to be expressed, for example, in their understandings of Disraeli clarified in this book.

However, when it comes to the issue of responsibility of Jewish leaders in the Shoah, their positions seem to be reversed. Berlin emphasizes the situational fact that Jewish leaders in Nazi-controlled ghettos had only limited freedom and then relieved the leaders of their responsibilities, while Arendt argues that although limited, they had freedom of choice, and therefore can be held accountable. Is it a misunderstanding that the positions of the two seem to be reversed, at least in terms of emphasis, on the relationship between human freedom and its circumstances? Even more interestingly, this interpretation seems to raise interesting points about their theories of liberty. In this aspect, Arendt seems, curiously enough, to come close to Hobbes's account of liberty. Hobbes held that contracts made out of fear were not void. Defining liberty as the absence of physical restraint, Hobbes said that as long as there is a physical possibility to act against fear, there remains freedom at any rate. It seems clear that Arendt's theory of liberty (not political liberty) is similar to Hobbes' theory. On the contrary, if we use the ideas of republican theorists such as Pettit and Skinner (advocates of freedom as non-domination), then Berlin though usually considered the advocates of this Hobbesian theory of liberty, i.e. freedom as non-constraint, seems in this context to make an argument that takes the republican conception into account. This book gives us this kind of fine chance of rethinking over our established images of the two thinkers.

### On liberty

As to the theory of liberty, especially that of Berlin, Hiruta examines Berlin's two conceptions of positive liberty: Stoic conception and rationalist one. This is a natural interpretative choice from the viewpoint of dealing with the common theme of Berlin and Arendt, 'totalitarianism and freedom', which is

the very theme of this book. Berlin, however, discusses a third, or another conception, not strictly speaking the conception of freedom, but one that is often confused with freedom: namely, a desire for recognition. Needless to say, this is an important concept in linking Berlin with nationalism, but I wonder if there is some merit in comparing Arendt with him in this regard. Arendt also attaches great importance to the recognition of actors by others (audience) in public spaces. However, this is still a desire for excellence at the same time, and it seems to be modelled on the actions of heroic individuals. Berlin also emphasizes the importance of an individual's desire for recognition, but what he pays particular attention to is the approval of the group to which the individual belongs from other groups. This collective level of recognition is, he insists, the basis of personal safety, i.e. the fundamental interest for individual liberty. Berlin, of course, is well aware of the danger that this desire can threaten the individual's negative liberty, and therefore believes that recognition itself is not a liberty. But the difference in their understanding of recognition once again reflects those in their understanding of the political which, I guess, might reveal that Berlin has an eye for the weak that Arendt relatively lacks.

Regarding Berlin's idea of negative liberty, Hiruta holds that there is a mixture of two conceptions: 'non-interference' and 'the ability to choose'. This mixture is recognized as an essential element in Berlin's discussion of what human freedom is, or what the concept of liberty is about. According to this book the reason why these two elements are mixed in Berlin lies in his notion that it is more important to present an ideal of humanity than to make a conceptual analysis. This part of the book is truly the most analytical and instructive one, but I have a different interpretation. Berlin's understanding of 'the ability to choose' is, in my reading, related to 'the conditions of liberty', and is not central to his conception of liberty. Above all, Berlin's theme in 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (Berlin, 1958) (rather than 'From Hope and Fear Set Free'; Berlin, 1964) was liberty as 'non-interference'; that is, it was *political* liberty that he examined. If intervention is 'evil' as the opposite of liberty, then 'thing to be intervened', that is negative liberty, should have positive value, which will be understood as the question of how many worthwhile opportunities are available. The question of whether there are many worthy opportunities is an objective question for Berlin, but 'opportunity' in this context includes possibility, that is, opportunities that one can reasonably expect to have. In this issue of the amount of such opportunities, the intervention by others becomes a problem, and then, the perception of the presence or absence of intervention is greatly influenced by the theory concerning a matter of social causation. Here, the subject of 'conditions of liberty' comes to the fore. Having 'the ability to choose', and increasing it, is a good thing. But it is not a question of negative liberty. Nor is it a matter of positive liberty in Berlin's terms. The distinction between liberty and the conditions of liberty was really serious for Berlin, because it was indispensable for 20th century liberals to secure the sacredness of individual freedom against the threat of totalitarianism.

### Political theory, human nature, and empiricism

Another issue that this book prompts us to reconsider is our understanding of the political theories of Arendt and Berlin. First, about consequentialism. Although both of them are highly critical of consequentialism (utilitarianism), differences in their criticisms reveal the important elements of their differing understandings of politics. Arendt, on the one hand, is purely anti-consequentialist and at times seems to lack a sufficient care for accountability for consequences. This is reflected in her appreciation of the student movement of the 1960s and the Hungarian Revolution. On the other, since Berlin has a so-called Weberian sense of politics, he has paid more attention to the consequences of politics (the actions of politicians), although he maintains a cautious distance from the political realism of certain kind. However, Hiruta emphasizes that Berlin is anti-consequentialist (Hiruta, 2021: 145, 252 n. 107). Indeed this understanding seems to be reasonable because if we take into account Berlin's value pluralism which in theory contains the incommensurability of values, rational calculation over the trade-offs among different values may well appear to be inappropriate. However, especially when compared to Arendt, it is certainly true that Berlin shows some realistic views of politics (e.g. Hiruta, 2021: 169,

193). Therefore, this book teaches us that we still need to reconsider the relationship between value pluralism and political realism.

Finally, I would like to discuss their understanding of humanity in relation to political theory. It should be emphasized that this book presents us a very attractive view of political theory, that is, the notion that good political theory is based on an appropriate view or model of human beings. Such a notion is in particular central to Arendt's political theory – her main work is *The Human Condition* anyway. But what about Berlin? Can value pluralism and the ideal of humanity be compatible? Certainly, the view of human being as 'choice-making creature' is based on Berlin's value pluralism (Hiruta, 2021: 62–63). But is it possible for Berlin to have a particular vision of what it means to be human? Admittedly, the vision of humanity which Berlin maintains is negative and minimalist; it enquires what is inhuman and what is the denial of humanity. Indeed Berlin at the same time has a kind of universalism about human nature which, according to him, is supposed to ensure intelligibility between different cultures. In any case, even if Arendt and Berlin are compared from the point of view of humanity, we will come up with a big gap in the conception of their view of human beings. Arendt's vision of humanity can be said to be a kind of perfectionism; her argument for arrogance in particular supports this reading (Hiruta, 2021: 154). But that's not the case with Berlin. Can his vision be called an empirical explanation of human beings? It certainly looks like that, but in that case, the Humean problem of the relationship between facts and norms naturally arises.

We thus face the question concerning the nature of empiricism in Berlin, which I hold is an appropriate question to ask since it is by the support for empiricism that he distinguishes himself from her. Apparently, Berlin has an empirical theory different from that of Russell and Ayer, and it seems to be the basis of his normative argument. Or could it be said that what Berlin envisages is the human condition, the condition in which many individual human beings coexist? This is a different conception of the human condition from Arendt's; the existentialist question over a meaningful way of life is not included in this vision. Instead, it is important for each person to freely ask such questions under this condition. Negative liberty becomes indispensable when multiple individuals who ask such questions, that is, make choices, coexist. In this vision of coexistence, unlike Arendt, Berlin's model conception of individuals is radically egalitarian. However, this ideal vision of humanity is considered to be based upon our common experience. In my understanding, his unique empiricism has strong relevance to his own view of intellectual history which has its basis upon his understanding of Russian tradition and which emphasizes the importance of 'the power of ideas'. This is a valuable point I have learned from this book.

## References

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